

# interzone/25

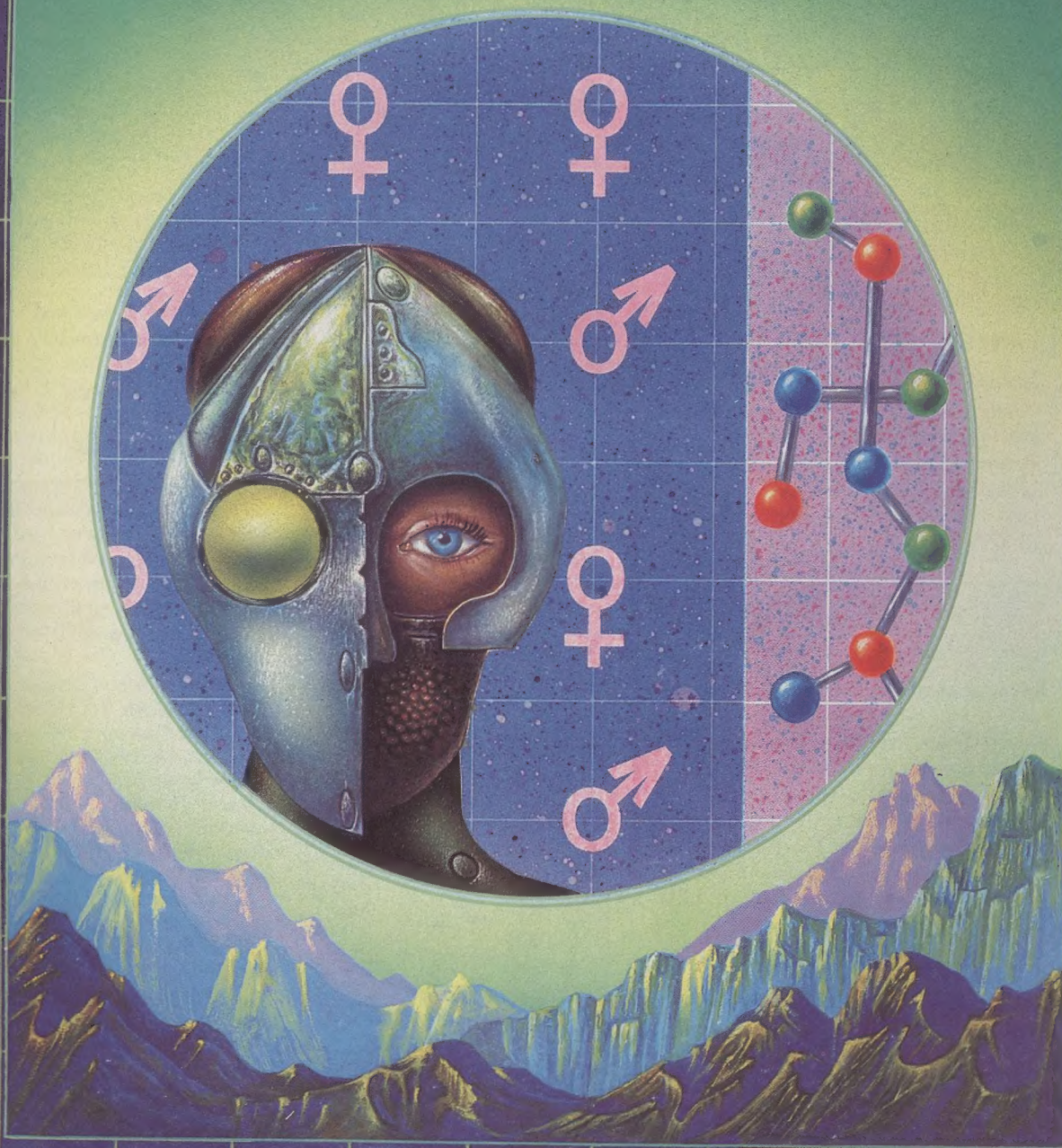
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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

SEPT/OCT  
1988

New stories by Ian Watson, Paul Preuss,  
David Langford, Christopher Burns and others

## Terry Pratchett Interview



Thomas M. Disch on Whitley Strieber

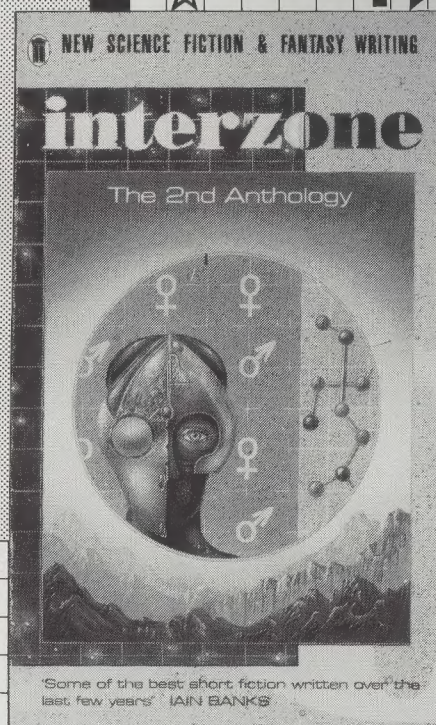


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LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

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Friday 12th August (6.00-7.00pm)

Forbidden Planet Bookshop, 71 New Oxford Street, London WC1. Meet some of the contributors to **Interzone: The 2nd Anthology** at an evening signing session. If you are unable to attend but would like to reserve a copy please telephone - 01 836 4179 or 01 379 6042

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The Montpelier Literary Society Present:  
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**Back-issues** are available at £1.95 each in the UK (£2.50 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: \$4 sea mail or \$5 air mail.) All issues are still in print except numbers 1, 5 and 7. Order them from *Interzone's* main address.

**Submissions:** unsolicited manuscripts are welcomed, but each one must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope of adequate size. Persons overseas please send a disposable manuscript (marked as such) and two International Reply Coupons. We are unable to reply to writers who do not send return postage. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused. Story submissions should be sent to any one of the following addresses:

Lee Montgomerie, 53 Riviera Gardens, Leeds LS7 3DW

Simon Ounsley, 21 The Village Street, Leeds LS4 2PR

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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 25

September/October 1988

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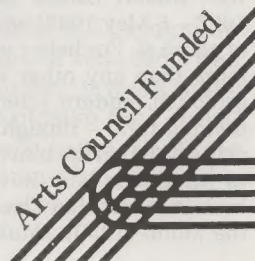
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# EDITORIAL & NEWS

## David Pringle

Here is the new bimonthly *Interzone*, with a greatly increased print run, new distributors and some internal changes. We hope you like it. Of course, our aim is to continue publishing good science fiction of all types, by writers both established and new. There will be further changes in the coming issues, as we reach out for an ever wider audience. We've been building steadily for six years, but this is the most exciting time for the magazine since its inception. (Our long-term readers could help us maximize the new readership by taking note of the distributors' names and addresses given at the foot of page 3, and by passing this information on to their local newsagents and booksellers.)

One minor change, starting right here, is that we've decided to do away with the distinction between the old "Editorial" and "News" columns, and to run the two together in a fairly free and informal way (without constant use of the editorial "we"). So, in future, if you want the latest news and chat you'll know to turn straight to page 4...

### CLIFFORD SIMAK AND ROBERT HEINLEIN

I was saddened by the recent deaths of these two grand old men of American science fiction. Although they were very different writers, the works of both have given me an enormous amount of pleasure in the past. **Clifford Donald Simak** (3 August 1904 – 25 April 1988) wrote a warm, bucolic and humane brand of sf which has appealed to several generations of readers – and always, especially, to the young. Towards the end of his long career his novels became very repetitive, yet they always contained passages of the essential Simak, and hence were always worth reading. I'm sure many of us will remember him especially for *Ring Around the Sun* (1953), *Way Station* (1963) and *All Flesh is Grass* (1965), and for the wonderful short stories collected in various volumes ranging from *Strangers in the Universe* (1956) to *The Marathon Photograph* (1986).

Important as Simak's contribution was, **Robert Anson Heinlein** (7 July 1907 – 8 May 1988) was the true giant of genre sf. For better or worse, he did more than any other single writer to establish modern science fiction as a distinct form – though, sadly, he also contributed to the blurring of that form in his otiose later novels. But at his best, in books like *The Man Who Sold the Moon* (1950), *Double Star* (1956),

*The Door Into Summer* (1957), *Have Space Suit – Will Travel* (1958) and *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (1966), he was the most fluent and skilled practitioner of hard-edged American sf. He was always a yarn-spinner, a pedagogue and a propagandist but also, frequently, an artist (of course, he would have been the first to deny that). Tom Disch once described Heinlein as a "diamond in the rough," which is most apt.

Both these authors lived into their eighties, and continued writing until near the end. As it happens, both were obsessed with the standard sf themes of longevity and immortality. In *Way Station*, Simak's hero Enoch Wallace is 124 years old, while Heinlein's Lazarus Long (in *Methuselah's Children* and *Time Enough for Love*) is a good deal older than that. Alas, reality has not caught up with science fiction. For now we must say: goodbye, Enoch Wallace; farewell, Lazarus Long.

### AWARDS, AWARDS

The 1988 **Nebula Awards**, presented by the Science Fiction Writers of America, are as follows. Best novel: *The Falling Woman* by **Pat Murphy**. Best novella: "The Blind Geometer" by **Kim Stanley Robinson**. Best novelette: "Rachel in Love" by Pat Murphy. Best short story: "Forever Yours, Anna" by **Kate Wilhelm**. I'm well pleased with these results, since *Interzone* has published a story by Pat Murphy in the past ("His Vegetable Wife," issue 16) and hopes to have more from her in the near future. We also have in hand a new short story by Kim Stanley Robinson.

Winner of this year's **Philip K. Dick Award**, for the best sf or fantasy novel published in America as a paperback original, is **Patricia Geary** for her book *Strange Toys* (Bantam). Runner-up was **Mike McQuay** for his *Memories* (also Bantam). I have heard rather late in the day that **Geoff Ryman's** novella "Love Sickness" (IZ 20-21) won a British Science Fiction Association Award at Easter. Other 1988 BSFA Award winners are **Keith Roberts's** *Grainne*, for best novel, and **Jim Burns**, as best artist.

A new organization, the Horror Writers of America, has instituted yet another set of awards – to be known (surprise, surprise) as the Bram Stoker Awards. The names of this year's winners are unavailable at our time of going to press, but the HWA has announced in advance that it will be presenting "Life Achievement" prizes

to **Fritz Leiber** and **Frank Belknap Long**.

### PUBLISHING NEWS

Sussex-based popular-science author **John Gribbin**, who styles himself "the only British writer contributing regularly to *Analog*," but who in fact is much better known as a mainstay of the *New Scientist* and the *Guardian* "Futures" page, has just sold two new sf novels. The first, written in collaboration with **Marcus Chown** (reviews editor of the NS), is called *Double Planet* and will appear from Gollancz later this year. The other, provisionally entitled *Father to the Man*, is a solo effort on Dr Gribbin's part, and will appear from Tor in the USA in 1989. Useful personal data: among the Gribbin family pets there is a rabbit named Erasmus Darwin and a cat named Barrington Bayley.

**David S. Garnett**, author of "The Only One" (IZ 22), is editing two new sf anthology series for British publishers. For Macdonald/Futura he's doing *The Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook*, a large-format paperback which will contain a survey by **Brian Aldiss** and a review of the year by **John Clute**, as well as nigh on 100,000 words of reprinted fiction. That's coming out in November 1988. For Sphere Books he's editing *Zenith*, an original anthology series, the first volume of which will appear next March.

**Ellen Datlow**, fiction editor of *Omni* magazine, is co-editing with Terri Windling a new anthology series called *The Year's Best Fantasy*, to be published by St Martin's Press in the USA. She is currently looking for stories "from all branches of horror" (Terri Windling handles the pure fantasy). So if you have any horror material which you want her to consider, published or about to be published in 1988, send it to Ellen Datlow at *Omni*, 1965 Broadway, New York, NY 10023, USA. (I'm pleased to say she already has her eye on stories which have appeared in *Interzone*.)

Cy Chauvin writes to inform us that he has recently edited *The Tale That Wags the God*, a posthumous collection of essays by **James Blish** (available for \$15 from Advent: Publishers, PO Box A3228, Chicago, IL 60690, USA). The 290-page volume also contains an extensive bibliography of Blish's work compiled by his widow, Judith Lawrence Blish.

And I might as well blow my own trumpet here – David Pringle's **Modern Fantasy: The 100 Best Novels** will appear from Grafton Books in October 1988, a few weeks before the World Fantasy Convention (which is being held in London over Halloween weekend; write to **Steve Jones**, 130 Park View, Wembley, Middlesex HA9 6JU,

Concluded on p.66



# Paul Preuss

## The Long Fall Home

**S**econds before impact, Travis realized the pilot was unconscious. Too late. The station loomed in the windows of the little satellite tender; the screech of metal on metal drowned his surprised yelp. Even as he bounced his head off the deck he noted with amazement the brilliant flares that spewed past the window, aluminium shrapnel burning in an out-rush of pure oxygen from the ruptured air lock.

In the Newtonian exchange – one slow billiard ball against the rack – the several-thousand-tonne space station was nudged into an imperceptibly different orbit. The satellite tender that had smacked it, in which Travis was a passenger, was now skidding away at a flat angle, its cabin door whistling through a thin rupture in the gasket of its docking collar.

Inside the little tender Travis struggled to get the unconscious pilot's helmet over his head and seal it to his suit. Travis was taking big gulping breaths as he did so, filling his lungs from what air remained in the cramped cabin. As the whistle dwindled to nothing, a suspiciously giggly sense of what-the-hell crept up on him, warning him that he had to get his own helmet on. That took about four seconds, longer than it should have in the tender's lazy spin. He punched his chest valve, and air hissed into his suit.

Travis allowed himself a quick sigh. It was going to be one of those ODTAA days, just one damn thing after another.

He dragged the pilot free of his straps and quickly taped him to the wall with tape from the roll he kept at his waist. He wrestled his wide shoulders forward and clambered into the single control seat, buckling down, slapping at the panel switches to douse the hysterical alarm blinkers.

"Uh, Euclid, this is Twinkletoes. Do you read?"

"Copy, UT-two. Trav, this is Takumi. Everybody's in the cellar but me and George and Lizzy. What's your ES?"

"Let's see, looks like we got total loss of cabin pressure. Max passed out, I don't know what's wrong. He's suited up, and air's flowing in his suit."

The star field outside the trapezoidal windows wobbled drunkenly, then was sliced away by the brilliance of the blue North Atlantic 400 kilometres beneath the ship. It was a beautiful, almost cloudless early fall day down there, but Travis had no time to appreciate it. While he talked, Travis wiggled the joy stick. In the absence of air to carry sound, he heard – if you could call it that – the hiss of the attitude jets through the seat of his pants. Like a series of long, low farts after a bowl of Uncle Albert's industrial-

strength chili. Comforting.

"Travis, do you have control of your vehicle?"

The blue ocean went away and the white-painted space station swam into view – *pooot* – and out again – *poot, poot* – and in again, each time staying a little longer.

"Give me about five more seconds."

Euclid Station was a small, ungainly thing, a confusion of spidery trusses and flimsy panels and random spheres and cylinders, feebly floodlit against the brute glare of subarctic September. The station housed a score of astronauts, engineers, scientists, and government busybodies; all but the short-timers among them were presently huddled in the big "storm cellar," a tube of sheet iron surrounded by many cubic yards of plain sand. Ten minutes ago Houston had relayed warning of a major solar flare from sun-watching satellite sensors. Euclid was sliding toward the blue white polar region, pursued by a hail of lethal protons incoming at a quarter of light speed.

Caught outside the station with Travis and his pilot in the satellite tender was another ship and the six people in its crew, a high-orbit shuttle that was at this moment urgently trying to redock at the main launch bay.

In the tender's windows the ocean and the stars stopped contending. Travis eased the joystick forward, and the tender moved slowly toward the station. He spoke cheerfully into his suit mike: "Takumi, my friend, my updated ES is that I've got a pilot out of commission and a pissant little tin can of a spacecraft with no air in it, but it'll still fly. I reckon we're ready to come in out of the heat now."

A few seconds passed before he got an answer. "Travis, I'm trying to figure out how we can help you. We have severed gas lines in the utility air lock."

"No sweat, we'll use the launch bay, soon as you evacuate that high orbit choo-choo and shove it out of the way."

"We've run that option. Estimate is a minimum one hour to dock and clear the hatch. She's loaded, Trav. We've got to off-load some of that fuel to vent over-pressure."

Travis didn't bother asking for details. The big shuttle had been interrupted in its launch sequence, and like an airliner lifting from the runway, it was a flying bomb, bloated with toxic and explosive fuel. It had to be secured in place in the launch bay until excess fuel could be bled off into the station's holding tanks, blocking the only remaining pressurized entrance to the station.



The ratio was cold and simple. Six lives in the shuttle to two in the satellite tender.

"An hour, huh?"

"Yeah, Trav. Houston's putting a tiger team on your situation. We ought to have some fresh options for you soon."

**E**uclid Station completely circled the Earth every ninety minutes, sixteen times a day; now heading north to the Arctic Circle, in forty-five minutes it would be approaching the Antarctic. At both poles in the Earth's magnetic field lines curve down to the ground, steering captured charged particles into the atmosphere – producing delicate auroras below but leaving orbiting objects naked to the electromagnetic storm. Unlike its sister, Archimedes Station, whose orbit never took it outside the magnetically shielded middle latitudes, Euclid was exposed to radiation eight hours in every twenty-four.

"Patch me into Houston, okay?" Travis requested. "Wilco."

"...investigating opening the weld in Corridor Z. That's in the schedule for next week anyway." Caught in midsentence, the relaxed, gently concerned female voice of Houston's mission communicator, the Capcom, sounded in Travis's headset. "Another alternative is to put all hands in pressure suits and blow one of the emergency hatches. Aside from the inherent risk, however, we have to calculate how long it will take to resupply your oxygen. First approximation is not promising."

"Houston, this is Travis Hill."

"Go ahead, Travis."

"What are the likely dose numbers?"

"Current estimates are that you and your pilot will have taken approximately twenty-five rads from early fast protons by the time you get over the hill. You could collect another hundred rads on each pass over the poles, as long as the flare lasts."

"Good-sized flare."

"That's a roger."

If exposed to 500 rads in a short time, a human stands a fifty-fifty chance of dying within thirty days. Two hundred rads produces serious illness, although the chances of recovery are favourable. Workers on Euclid were monitored and sent home if they got seventy-five rads in a year. After three years they were retired in any event.

The Capcom spoke again. "Travis?"

"I'm listening."

"It doesn't look like we can get you inside the station this nightside pass. Suggest that when the shuttle is in the launch bay, you tuck up Earthside of its number three tank. The liquid H-two in the tank will give you some shielding, with minimum secondary radiation risk. That could reduce the dose to about seventy-five rads over the Antarctic."

"Gee, I feel better already."

"There's a reasonable certainty they can move the shuttle out of the way within this orbit."

Takumi, aboard Euclid, chimed in. "We'll do it, Trav."

"We're pretty confident they can do it," said Houston.

Travis was being told to give in, to stop thinking of escape. He was being told to exceed his career limits

for radiation exposure. They would never let him go into space again. "What kind of retirement benefits you offerin'?"

The woman in Houston tried to put a smile into her voice. "We can't do miracles with physics, Travis. But we'll see what we can do with Uncle Sam's red tape."

For a long moment Travis was silent. The ungainly station was directly over his head now, slipping past by millimetres each second. The high-orbit shuttle was settling into the launch bay, its three bloated fuel tanks clustered like a clutch of ostrich eggs beneath its stubby torso.

Travis wiggled the joystick. The satellite tender responded instantly. "Houston, I am proceeding to dock the UT-two under the shuttle's number three tank, per your advice."

"Copy."

"Say if we can assist," said Euclid.

"Thanks, Takumi, this is the easy part."

Minutes passed as the tender approached and scraped gently across the orange fibre-glass skin of the fuel tank. Travis manipulated the tender's articulated arms with practiced skill, hooking the claws through D-ring hard points in the tank's surface until the tender clung fast to the shuttle with a steel grip.

Travis twisted in his seat and studied Max's peaceful face through his lightly misted faceplate. He poked at the pilot's shoulder, where blinking biomedical monitors were clustered for display. "Houston and Euclid, copy this for the record. Max's biomed shows a normal and stable heart rate, normal and stable blood pressure, normal and stable respiration, brain-wave pattern consistent with ordinary sleep, no signs of distress" – talk about wearing your heart on your sleeve – "and I don't know what the hell's the matter with him, but I can't do anything about it while he's inside that suit. Euclid, assure me you will be able to reach Max if I am incapacitated."

"No sweat. Soon's we move the shuttle out of the way, we'll come get both of you."

"Copy that, Euclid." Travis slapped the chest plate to release his suit harness. "You come get Max as quick as you can, Takumi. Don't bother about me, I'm bailing out."

"Say again, Travis?" Euclid spoke first; Houston's nearly simultaneous reply was delayed by distance.

Travis was already yanking at the tender's ruined docking collar. He shoved hard against sprung hinges, moving the hatch aside with effort, squeezing through. He floated free of the little ship, under the orange belly of the shuttle tank.

He spoke in bursts into his communications cap radio, spacing his words for economy. "I figure if I can launch an escape pod...in the next five minutes...I can hit air a couple of minutes after that...be in the water in half an hour."

**T**he orbital escape pods distributed at various handy points on the exterior of Euclid Station were generally regarded by astronauts with amused contempt – another inept safety gesture on the part of ground-bound bureaucrats, sops less practical than an airliner's floating seat cushions.

"Hill, this is not a life-threatening situation."

Travis recognized Taylor Stith's voice in his head-



set, querulous, trembling on the edge of temper – the Wunderkind flight director had just violated etiquette by grabbing Capcom's mike. "Those pods have not been operationally tested," said Stith.

"Copy." Travis continued his progress around the outside of the shuttle's bulging hydrogen tank, flying hand to hand from D-ring to D-ring; behind him the abandoned tender, with Max inside, looked very small, like a mosquito poised on an oversized female breast. Travis was breaking the rules even more grandly than that ground pounder Stith, of course, manoeuvring freely in space without an umbilical, without a manoeuvring unit, without even a safety tether.

Bright dots of ice floating in water the colour of Aqua Velva formed the convex sky above Travis's head, while beneath him the flimsy raft of Euclid Station floated in a bowl of unblinking stars. A brief leap across the open space between the shuttle's tank and the edge of the station's launch bay took him to the nearest pod storage bin. He flipped its barn doors open.

The escape pods were lenticular ceramic heat shields with thermoplastic covers, hardly bigger than Porta Potties. Stored inside each was a parachute and an inflatable raft in an ejection rig and – the only really specialized gadget – a hand-aimed, gyro-stabilized, solid-fuel retrorocket. An astronaut who had to leave orbit in a hurry was supposed to climb in, lie back, clutch the retrorocket to his or her chest, adjust position and attitude with its gas jets, then take aim at an easily identifiable star specified by mission control and pull the trigger.

The impulse from the solid-fuel rocket would gradually slow the pod until orbital velocity was lost, whereupon the astronaut threw away the rocket, closed the flimsy hatch with its little bubble window, and tried to relax while falling through the atmosphere, on fire, decelerating at five gees plus. Below about 7,000 metres or so the pod's cover would pop off, spilling the astronaut and deploying the chute.

Simple.

In seconds he had the nearer pod free of its straps. Lifting the thermoplastic lid, he found all the neat packages of equipment nestled where they should be. He ripped open Velcro fastenings of yellow webbing, yanked at cotter pins festooned with red warning strips. One of them activated a SARSAT radar beacon.

"Hill, we just ran some quick numbers and we want you to consider that the calculated uncertainties in your re-entry show a damn poor chance of getting any helicopter ship near you in less than two days from Hawaii. Assuming you land in water."

"It's gonna be dark soon. How about giving me a star?"

"Astronaut, this is a direct order. I'm ordering you not to attempt to use that escape pod. We can't be responsible for your safety." While no one had ever used a pod, it was not strictly true that none had been tested. What was true was that in no test had an unmanned pod ever been seen again.

"You can't fire me, Taylor... and I won't quit." The pod drifted free of its mooring. Travis kicked off and went with it. For a moment he had a bizarre image of himself as a surfer launching a surfboard while standing on his head. It made him irritable. "Give me some-

thing to aim at, dammit. Or I'll shoot from the hip."

Flipping over to squat on the pod, he shrugged off his life-support backpack and hooked into the pod's portable emergency oxygen supply. He wrestled himself onto his back and tugged the parachute straps across his chest and shoulders, pulling the life raft package up under his rump. The strap edges scrunched thick layers of suit material into an oppressive lump in his crotch. It was exhausting work, and he heated up fast without the coolant flow from his abandoned backpack, but it had to be done right; parachutists had dismembered themselves with loose harness.

Now Euclid was overhead, and the dazzle of the north Greenland ice pack was rolling unseen below him. Euclid's orbit was inclined several degrees from true polar coordinates, and within moments the whole orbiting miscellany – station, shuttle, pod, and all – would be heading south across the Northwest Territories of Canada.

"Travis, this is Houston." The voice was Capcom's again. Flight director Mr Taylor Stith had evidently realized that ambition was not to be served by putting himself in the front lines on this one. Travis imagined the newsheds. SPACE STATION CRISIS MISMANAGED: ASTRONAUT LOST / ASTRONAUT INCINERATES SELF / ASTRONAUT DROWNS / ASTRONAUT EATEN BY SHARKS. He forced a grin. His mother was always telling him that acting scared scares you, that acting brave makes you brave. "Go ahead, Houston."

"We have acquired your beacon. When you are secure, we want you to aim on Altair and do a one-second gas burst to separate from the station."

**H**e nudged the rocket canister into place with his knees, deflecting it at a low angle, and aimed across its verniers through its wide cross hairs. Altair was one of the brightest stars in the sky, the brightest star in the constellation Aquila, now just rising in the southwest above the twilight rim of the world. "I have it." Like all pilot astronauts and countless mariners before him, Travis had long ago committed Altair's position to memory.

"Whenever you're ready, Travis."

"Firing." The gas cylinder on the barrel of the bulky rocket pack puffed compressed gas into space. Travis saw nothing but the indicator light on the butt of the rocket pack, but he felt feathery pressure against his diaphragm from fractional gee forces. "One, one thousand," he murmured, and lifted his thumb from the gas button.

The stars had shifted. Euclid Station had rotated perceptibly to his right. There was silence in Travis's headset. "Still with me, Houston?"

"We're with you. Give us a moment before we finalize."

"Copy, Houston. Thanks for the help."

The pause was a fraction of a second longer than it had to be. "We aim to please, Travis. You do likewise."

Travis ignored the implied rebuke and took comfort in the promise. He really wasn't ready to think about what state his life must be in, that he'd rather stake it on this desperate chance than allow himself to be barred from space forever. It wasn't the time for that kind of introspection, anyway.

"Travis, assuming you're lying down in that thing,



you should find Beta Aquarius straight ahead. Do you have any question about its identity?"

"No. I have Beta Aquarius in the verniers."

"Copy."

Again there was silence. He lay supine in a cockle-shell raft, adrift on the river of night, judging its current by the stars and nebulae that washed over the gunwales.

"Travis, we want you to take aim on Beta Aquarius and initiate the preset charge precisely on our mark, T minus thirty seconds. Do you copy?"

"Copy." Again he nudged the fat barrel of the retro-rocket and sighted through the open cross hairs at the white star.

"Travis, I have a note here from Guidance. Says the common name of Beta Aquarius as Sadalsuud, if I'm pronouncing that correctly. It means the Luckiest of the Lucky." The Capcom's voice was without emotion, as if she were afraid to jinx the omen by regarding it as anything other than a useful datum.

He would need the luck. The first unmanned test pods had had an attitude problem. The pods were meant to skitter across the top of the atmosphere like a pebble on a pond, until they slowed enough to sink straight in. With the wrong attitude, a pod didn't even bounce before tumbling into meteoric ruin. After NASA had licked that, the test pods began making it into the atmosphere, their beacons beeping right up until ionization blackout – but after that, nothing.

"Ten seconds to de-orbit burn..."

He listened to the numbers and thought of nothing but keeping the retrorocket braced, the star in his cross hairs. When the count ran all the way down, he squeezed the trigger.

This time flame spurted between his toes. His stomach sank. The impulse was gentle, but it seemed to go on forever. The stars slowed, and Euclid wheeled away into darkness before the rocket flickered out.

"A good burn, Travis. Now all you've got to do is roll into eyeballs-in position."

"Roger." With quick bursts of gas he rotated the pod until the surface of the planet was rolling away beneath his feet. Below him the Earth was darkening, and scattered lights winked on in the great glacier-planed desolation of central Canada. The regions of middle air were hung with milky veils of northern light. He unlatched the spent rocket and gave it just enough of a shove over the side to ensure that it wouldn't re-enter on top of him.

"We're scrambling ASR from Johnson Island. See you in Waikiki."

He knew this communicator, a red-haired kid, pretty and smart and tough as nails. "You meet me in person and I'll buy you a mai tai."

"Can't pass up an offer like that." She paused. "Go with God."

Choked good wishes from other voices in Houston and aboard Euclid joined in, whispering in his headset – writing him off, he thought.

He kept his amen to himself.

**L**ike a tetherball wrapping around a pole, the escape pod accelerated as it drove toward Earth. The first widely spaced molecules of air offered resistance. Travis began to feel a bit sludgy. He pulled the thermoplastic cover over his head and

peered through its fishbowl window; between his helmet and the window there was so much refraction that he could no longer make out the stars.

A bead of sweat trickled from the inside of his brow, down the side of his nose, into his eye. Stung like hell – that's gravity for you. He could feel his weight now, pressing against all the ridges and wrinkles of his clammy suit. The wad between his legs was as oppressive as a loaded diaper.

Something whispered in his ears, and a flicker of red licked over the glass, inches from his eyes. Perhaps he was imagining it, but the pod seemed to vibrate with febrile energy, nervy as a wet fingertip sliding around the rim of a glass.

The window was all red, tending to orange – not the red of flame, but the diffuse red of a neon sign, glowing with the gas discharge. The abused air molecules outside the pod were hot, excited enough to glow, but too far from one another to transfer much heat to the pod.

That proved to be a temporary state: molecules swiftly swarmed closer as the diving pod continued to accelerate against the braking force of the air. The window was ablaze with pearly light, and inside Travis's spacesuit the air was getting unmanageably hot. Vapour clouded his faceplate. Sweat poured into his eyes.

Steady white flame outside the window, and a banshee's wail rattling his eardrums...he hadn't been prepared for the noise, inexpressibly louder than the controlled bellow of a returning space shuttle, a painful shriek drilling into his head, straight through his solid helmet. He groaned but couldn't hear himself. Neither could anyone else, for by now the falling pod was deep inside the cone of ionized gas that blocked the passage of radio waves.

Each second was a minute, each minute a year. Ten minutes in real time he basted in his juices in the howling furnace, waiting for death. The gee forces increased as fiery air slowed the onrush of the escape pod from 29,000 kilometres an hour to 19,000, to 9,000, all the while piling stones on his collapsing belly.

His brain force-fed on blood, and black flecks swam before his eyes; his oppressed guts threatened to heave. He closed his eyes, but that was worse: he began sliding dizzily toward unconsciousness as an inner voice said calmly, as if it had no stake in the matter, *this may have been a mistake.*

The white glow flickered again, fell back through pearl to pink to red, and once more to black. The shriek subtly altered, and groggily he perceived that he was hearing not just the vibration of metal and plastic but the sound of wind. A drop of condensed moisture fell from his faceplate onto his cheek.

The ride got bumpy; the pod encountered seemingly solid layers of air, then dropped into wells of vacuum. He was slammed from one side to the other as the pod bucked in the turbulence. He knew he had five minutes to fall before he got down to air thick enough to grab his chute, but his time sense had been destroyed. Was the blackness outside the window due to high altitude or merely to night? He had no choice but to trust the pod's altimeter.

The turbulence increased; his helmet bounced painfully off the useless window. For a moment he



was sure he was travelling up, not down, and he heard a rattle of hail like a handful of birdshot thrown against the pod cover. Lightning glared through his window. Thunderhead! He had to suppress momentary panic – a primitive fear, left over from student pilot days.

Not that a thunderstorm couldn't still destroy him.

Suddenly the ride was smooth again. As his throat ripped into the beginning of a sigh, the pod's cover ripped away and the mortar shell he was sitting on blew him into the night. He tumbled like a rag doll through the air. The unsecured oxygen package slammed into his face, shattering his faceplate, and he pawed at it and tore it from its connection. Somewhere deep in the back of his skull the self-that-refused-to-get-involved noted another useful design change.

The drogue caught and the chute spilled and streamed out behind, tugging him upright just before it blossomed and braked him with a bruising jerk. He craned his head back to check the shroud lines. His shattered helmet got in the way; he twisted it, dragged it off his head, hurled it aside. He saw that the shrouds ran taut up to a small round canopy high above his head, darkly silhouetted against a sky of blue black clouds and moist stars.

He twisted the wrist locks on his gloves and consigned them to the air. He lifted his waist flap and worked at the waist ring until the top and bottom of his suit were detached, but the parachute harness prevented him from shedding more weight. He hung there, swinging in the night, with a fragrant breeze pushing into his nostrils and a wad of fabric crushing his balls, and he began to worry.

He could not yet see the surface below him, but he imagined the rolling immensity of the ocean. Already he was faint from the effort of pulling off his helmet and gloves – a few weeks in microgravity is sufficient to decondition the hardiest body – and he dreaded what was to come.

**I**nky ripples resolved out of the darkness beneath his white-booted feet, liquid black running on grey, teasing the eye to imagine a curve of moonless sea. Travis fidgeted with the parachute harness release. The ripples became swells; waves textured the swells. A tang of salt mist...

He pulled up his knees and flipped the releases as the heaving floor of black water rushed up and struck him. All was dense and ringing darkness, with something yanking hard at his foot, tumbling him into boiling confusion. There were bubbles all around him, he could feel them bulging and slithering between his inner and outer suit and wobbling over the skin of his face, but he could not see them.

Whatever it was still dragged at his foot, but his attention was completely focused on the mass of aluminium and nylon that swaddled his upper body. With a deliberation born of terror he held firmly to his open left sleeve while withdrawing the arm inside it, inevitably also pulling the garment over his face, where it clung. He did not panic – he had moved through panic to a place where the universe was reduced to a single dimension, a straight space-time line, allowing one act only, and then another – but reached outside with his free left arm and taking hold

of the right sleeve, forcing his reach against the rigid metal of the upper waistband now levering into his neck, pulled those arms apart...until the smothering whiteness of the upper suit was gone.

The lower half next: he pushed at its waist ring to no effect; his feet were stuck in his boots. He tucked himself as if doing a sit-up, but his abdominal muscles were so much spent elastic. He could reach to his boots, but he had no strength to pull at them.

He lay back then, and almost inhaled ocean. It seemed much the easiest solution, not only the easiest but really the only sensible course, because he was so very tired, and after all he had done his best...after all...

...his all...over...

That damned thing tugged on his leg again his shoulders slammed into the dirt a rock pounded into his ribs an oak thicket tore the side of his face and his ankle was about to snap the hooves were slamming into the caliche throwing yellow dust up his nose no goddam horse is gonna do that to me you sonofabitch all he had to do was reach up and grab that stirrup strap and haul himself up to where he could grab the saddle horn and grab that fancy long mane and he'd kill that fucking bonehead animal by God he'd put a .45 slug right in its ear if it was dumb enough to run all the way back to the barn with him still on it my Daddy'll give me the gun to do it too you'll see.

His arm was over the side of the raft and his right leg was out of the spacesuit bottom. The floating parachute harness still tugged at the empty boot. Irritably Travis kicked at the other leg, and the garment slithered off and silently sank.

There was a lot of stuff he was supposed to do now. Flares. Radio. Salvage the chute and all that. He'd get to it. Right now he needed rest, with his cheek snuggled against this hard rough bosom smelling of rubber cement, the salt water dribbling into his mouth...

He gagged and choked. He raised himself and screamed an obscenity – against the night, against his weakness and cowardice – and with strength he got from some unknown place he pulled himself into the bottom of the raft.

**H**e had passed out before he knew he was safely aboard. When he woke he felt nothing but his own immense weight, and something punching him rudely in the stomach. The sea. Six inches from his face was a curved wall of textured yellow, brilliant in sunlight – the raft's inflated gunwale. His soggy Snoopy hat, its radio dead and worse than useless, muffled his hearing, but beyond the lap and gurgle of water under his ear he could make out another sound, a distant rhythmic hiss and sharp intermittent crack, which puzzled him. Until he recognized it.

Surf.

Travis rolled carefully onto his back. The sky was soft blue, the clouds were benign billows of vapour, high and white, and the sun on his face was a warm caress. He dragged off the communications cap and hauled himself up, half sitting, half lying against the gunwale. The water beside the raft was of a startling blue – not the royal blue of the deep sea but the turquoise blue of a sandy lagoon.



A metre away, floating belly up just beneath the surface, was a three-metre-long hammerhead shark, dead as a plank. Did I land on it? Travis wondered, and started to giggle.

Repeatedly jumping up over the jagged horizon formed by the little nearby waves he saw, on the farther horizon, a long curl of white water curving away to the right and a flat strip of yellow sand beyond, surmounted by a uniform fringe of coconut palms. And on this side of the surf, coming toward him, were two palm-log canoes powered by outboard motors, driven by fat young men in orange and purple undershirts.

Travis tried to stifle his giggles, but it was really too funny. This wasn't Johnson Island. He wondered what the boatmen would think when they found this guy in a raft wearing this ridiculous suit of long underwear...

Still snorting and chuckling, he went back to sleep.

Later, waking in the bottom of a canoe to the racket of a two-cycle engine and the smell of unburned motor oil and fish, he did ask, but he couldn't understand the answer. He had never taken French.

Later still, in Houston, after they'd pumped him full of electrolytes and nutrients and reassured him that everybody on Euclid was in good health and fine spirits, including his friend Max, the pilot of the tender, whose undetected neurological aberrations would have grounded him even if he hadn't OD'd on

solar protons, a bureaucrat who was still trying to decide whether to treat Travis as a hero or a dangerous madman showed him on a map the exact point where he'd impacted: twenty-seven miles east-northeast of Manihi atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago.

He'd drifted for half a day, asleep the whole time, while search planes homed on his beacon. He was not implicated in the death of the shark.

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**Paul Preuss** (born 1942) is the author of *The Gates of Heaven* (1980), *Broken Symmetries* (1983), *Human Error* (1985) and other sf novels. A sometime producer of scientific films, he lives in California. The above story (which he says he would have liked to call "The Man Who Fell to Earth," but that title "has unfortunately been taken") is the first chapter of his new novel, *Starfire*, to be published in the UK by Simon & Schuster Ltd on 17th October 1988 at £11.95.

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# Ian Watson

## Lost Bodies

The hunt had gone by our cottage half an hour earlier, in full cavalry charge down the village high street. Hearing their clattery thunder, wine glasses in our hands, the four of us rushed to stare contemptuously through a front window.

Winter breeze flushed the riders' faces ruddy. Steam gusted from the sweating horses: brown engines, black engines. Harsh frost gripped the gardens opposite and glazed the steep slate roofs. It struck me as specially cruel to be chased and to die upon such a hard icy day. To be torn apart upon iron soil seemed irrationally worse than a death cushioned in soft mud.

When we trooped back to the parlour Jon said, "Of course foxes themselves tear furry little animals to pieces every day. We shouldn't waste too much sympathy on old Renard."

"They call him Charles James," Kirstie corrected. "That's what they call their quarry."

Jon looked blank, so my wife explained, "After the eighteenth century politician Charles James Fox. Notorious reformer and crook, he was. How the squires would have loved to set a pack of hounds on him!"

"My God, they still remember, two centuries later. That's what I hate about bloody history: the vendettas. Don't you?"

Now Kirstie is Irish – Dublin Irish – and her own land had been vexed to anguish by years of bloody history. As a rule she wasn't overtly political. Aside from the convent day-school she'd described to me her upbringing had been happy-go-lucky, little coloured by the troubles in the North. Now and then she flared up. This was one of those occasions.

"Sure, Charley's only a name to them. Oh you English can be so blind to history, when it suits. You forget all your exploitin' as though such tings never happened. Some countries can't help remembering when your hoofprints are all over us still."

The hunt was a sore point to her. The Irish might ride to hounds with gusto, but here was an English hunt trampling the countryside; and Kirstie had red hair, red as the fox they chased.

"Fiery lady, eh?" Jon leered at me as if her outburst must surely imply passion in bed. Whereas his own Lucy, blonde and pale and virginal-looking, and so coolly beautiful, perhaps wore her body like some expensive gown which she didn't want creased and stained? Again, perhaps not!

"Do you know," continued Kirstie, "there's this snooty hag – lady, she'd prefer – living in the Dower

House, Mrs Armstrong-Glynn? Used to breed bloodhounds half a century ago. By way of passing the time she told me to my face that for a good manhunt there was never anything to beat a redheaded lunatic. Red hair's the guarantee of a strong scent, she said." My wife fingered the high lace collar of her long, Victorian-pattern frock to ventilate herself.

Jon eyed Kirstie's rich russet mane as though eager to test the theory. Kirstie met his gaze with interest, though she still seemed piqued. Definitely some chemistry was working.

I asked, "Did you catch that news about the auction of titles at Sotheby's last week? On TV?" We all saw eye to eye on the snobbery of people like Mrs Armstrong-Glynn. One must hope that our Jag and Jon's Porsche, parked outside nose to tail, hadn't been bumped into by any heavy hunter. Too cold for the paintwork to be spattered with mud, presumably.

"Tell us," invited Lucy, a sparkle in her eye.

"Well, the Duke of Ardley sold off half a dozen titles to get some pocket money. One of the titles was Lord of the Manor of Lower Dasset. Lower Dasset's where we're going for lunch today. So a prostitute from London bid thirteen thousand quid and collared the title. She promptly bought a Range Rover and set off to survey her new domain. The village boys were all following her round like flies. 'Maybe she'll improve the night life,' quipped one. Then she announced she was going to buy a house in Lower Dasset to use as a rest home for hookers. I do wish it had happened here. That would show them."

Lucy laughed, and I topped up her glass from the bottle they'd brought as a present. "A bit different from your ordinary Anjou wine," Lucy had told Kirstie on presenting it. "We picked up a case of Château de Parnay in Parnay itself this summer. It's been chilled just perfect in the boot on the way here. Oh, on the way back from France the Porsche was loaded with cases from this cellar and that, and so cheap too. I thought Jon was going to toss my luggage out to make room." And Jon had grinned. "Those frogs know how to pack wine. Nose to tail like sardines. A French case is half the bulk."

"Lord of the Manor doesn't convey privileges, does it?" Lucy asked me.

"Such as the *Ius Primae Noctis*, you mean? The Lord's right to bed any village virgin on the night before her wedding?"

"Now there's an idea," said Jon. "Get in some practice but keep it in the family as it were. Can't go round experimenting anywhere, can we?"



"Not these days," agreed Lucy. She moistened her lips on the Château de Parnay and looked steadily at me, then at Kirstie. "You have to be very sure who you play with. Almost as sure as if they're genuine virgins."

Oh yes, this was in the air between us. In a peculiar way it was almost as though the four of us had remained authentic virgins, who now wished to lose our virginity safely. What could be more economic, more conservative of emotional and financial resources, than a chaste fidelity? So we were economic virgins.

Let me explain. We were all into money: dual income, no kids. Early on at university Jon and I had both espoused the new workaholic puritanism – work's so much more fun than sleeping around. He went into the City to trade shares and ride the wheel of fortune. I myself had switched from engineering to economics. A few years ago, with venture capital obtained by Jon, I founded my Concepts Consultancy to act as a bridge between innovators, the Patents Office, and industry. I marketed ideas; I turned neurons into banknotes.

Lucy, perfect image of the trendy new purity especially in her nurse-like white twin set, had given up medical research in favour of health insurance. Once, she would have liked to defeat the ageing process – to discover rejuvenation. But she reckoned that was at least a hundred years away. Why should she give herself as cheaply-sold fuel to light some future flame? With her background she quickly rose high in the business of assessing new health risks, new chances of death.

Kirstie had founded her own employment agency specializing in Irish girls and fellows seeking a life in London.

Yet lately Kirstie was restless; thus we had bought this cottage in the country. Stock Market troubles were fraying Jon. Lucy seemed expectant, though not of any babies.

And me? Well, it may seem silly but Kirstie – however loving – had always been inhibited in one respect. She had always bolted the bathroom door before taking a shower. She insisted on switching off the light before we made love – to free herself, so she said, from the notion of God observing her. She employed all sorts of stratagems with the result that whatever games we got up to in the dark incredibly I had never actually witnessed my wife in her birthday suit. Since we were faithful to one another in this world of AIDS this meant that I had not seen a naked woman in the flesh for years. The omission had begun to prey absurdly on my mind, assuming huge iconic significance, as though I was missing some launch window just as surely as Lucy had missed hers by being born too soon.

We must re-invigorate ourselves, the four of us! We must rediscover otherness, and encounter the naked stranger beneath the clothing of the friend. Logs crackled and bloomed with tongues of flame in the ingle below the copper hood. I smiled at Lucy; she returned my smile flirtatiously.

Though our cottage fronted the street directly, to the rear we had ample garden. A bouncy, mossy lawn mounted steeply between huge privet hedges towards distant wilderness. We paid a local unemployed chap

to come in and mow that lawn, trim that hedge. Forty feet into the lawn rose a mature chestnut tree, its base surrounded by a wreath of ferns, now blighted by cold.

Half an hour must have passed since the hunt went by when I looked out, when I saw a fox's head thrust from amongst the dying ferns. I was already pointing, even before the rest of the fox... failed to follow.

The head lurched forward a couple of feet, scuffing over the grass. It was a severed head. Six inches of spinal column, a rudder of ridged white bone, jutting behind it. The head, plus some snapped backbone, had been torn off the body as neatly as a finger slips off a glove. The body of the animal had been torn away, abolished – and yet the head had continued to flee, trailing that stump of spine like a little leg.

The beast's eyes appeared glossy. Its mouth hung open slightly, a pink tongue lolling, panting. The head jerked forward again and came to rest.

"Jesus and Mary!" cried Kirstie. Jon was gaping out of the window, as blanched as Lucy for once. Lucy stared; she was the cool one.

We must be the victims of some sick rural ritual. We were experiencing some initiation jape, to blood us as new residents. Day afore the hunt, you traps a fox and you chops his head off... A sly oaf must be hiding behind our chestnut tree, pushing the head with a stick. No, he'd be skulking beyond the hedge with a length of invisible fishing line paid out as puppet string.

"Some bugger's pulling that along!" Jon had reached the same conclusion.

How could the head look so alive? Answer: it was stuffed. How did it stay upright? Luck, sheer luck.

"Ha ha, Pete! Good joke. Who's pulling? Your gardener?"

"Nothing to do with me, I assure you!"

"In that case, come on." Jon darted, and I followed him: into the kitchen, out the door, up the brick steps on to the lawn.

Nobody was crouching behind the tree. No sniggers emerged from our hedge; our boundaries were silent. No string or nylon was attached to the head. The thing simply sat there on the frosted grass. It was undeniably alive. Numb, stunned, bewildered at the body it had lost, but alive.

"Sweet shit," Jon muttered.

How could a head live without a body? It did. How could a head travel without a body? By flexing the neck muscles, by thrusting with that bone-stump? It had travelled. Here it was, looking at us.

I reached down my hand.

"Don't!" called Lucy from the head of the steps. "It might bite."

"Bite?" Jon cackled – a brief eruption of hysteria.

Lucy strode up to us, fascinated, with Kirstie in tow. I suppose Lucy had seen enough nasties before opting out from the labs, but the real horror here wasn't blood and guts and rags of flesh. It was the sheer absence of those, the unspeakable absence of body itself from a creature which was manifestly still living.

Calm Lucy said, "Did you know that a head can survive for a while after being guillotined? In Nineteen-oh-something one French doctor knelt in front of a freshly chopped-off head and shouted the man's



name. The eyes opened and stared back. That particular head had fallen upright on the neck stump, staunching the haemorrhage."

"Jesus wept, spare us," said Kirstie.

"It soon died. Thirty years earlier, another doctor pumped blood from a living dog into a criminal's head three hours after decapitation. The lips stammered silently, the eyelids opened, the face awakened, said the doctor."

"That's absurd," exploded Jon. "Three hours? He was either lying or hallucinating."

She looked down. "Soviet doctors kept a dog's head alive detached from its body, didn't they?"

"Not lying on a fucking lawn, Lucy!"

She made to poke it with her toe. As her shoe slid through the grass I swear the base of the neck bunched up. The pointy head shifted a few inches, dragging its white stub. The fox blinked. It tried to lick its lips.

Kirstie shook with shivers. "It wants sanctuary, poor thing! It's parched after running from the hunt." Before we could discuss procedure she had swooped and picked the head up from behind by both ears. Holding it firmly away from her she hurried indoors.

**W**hen the rest of us regained the parlour Kirstie had already placed the fox's head on the pine table upon a copy of the *Cork Examiner*; she advertised in all the main Irish newspapers. Rushing to the kitchen, she returned with a saucer of water.

The fox's muzzle touched the offered liquid but it didn't lap. How could it drink, how could it eat? Food or water would spill out of its neck. The head made no move at all now. Like clockwork running down, I thought. Desperation to escape had propelled it as far as our garden – how? – and no further locomotion was possible...It didn't seem to be dying. The head continued to survive, eyes bright as ever.

"'Tis a miracle," said my wife. "A terrible awful miracle."

Lucy stooped to scrutinize the wound and the jut of spine. "Do you have a magnifying glass?"

Kirstie obliged, and Lucy spent minutes inspecting closely.

Finally she said, "It seems organic. An advanced civilization might build an organic machine that would function as a living creature, but which you could take apart. The parts might still function in isolation. Maybe we could build something like that ourselves in a few hundred years time. We're going to learn a lot about organic mini-microcomputers, machines the size of single cells. Stuff that could mimic cells but not be real cells. They could be programmed to build a body...an immortal body."

"What are you driving at?" asked Jon.

"Maybe we could build a human machine and plug somebody's head into it when their natural body failed. We'd start with animal experiments, wouldn't we? Rat and chimp and dog. Or fox."

"Are you suggesting that the hunt caught a manufactured fox? Some sort of biologically-built fox that escaped from an experiment somewhere near?"

"It couldn't happen for a century or two." The keenest regret, and desire, sounded in Lucy's voice. "This head must be false too. I'd love to examine slices under an electron microscope."



Illustrations by Tina Horner



"No!" cried Kirstie. "The poor suffering ting – that would be vivisection. If it struggled so hard to survive, the least we can do is –" She didn't know what.

"Wouldn't this be the ideal tool for spying?" resumed Lucy. "False wildlife, false birds. Pull off the head after a mission and download it through the spine into some organic computer. Humans couldn't produce this yet. Either it fell through some time-hole from the future, or else it's from out there, the stars. And if there's one such, why not others? Why not false people too, acting just like us, watching us, then going somewhere afterwards – having their heads pulled off and emptied?"

I suppose it was inevitable that I should call to mind Kirstie's scrupulousness in never letting me see her in the nude, her dislike of sports (which might involve brief garments), all her stratagems; the evidence accumulated. Unlike foxes people don't boast inbuilt fur coats to hide the joins. Why had the creature headed here of all places? Why was Kirstie so defensive of it? Try as I might to thrust suspicion out of my head, stubbornly it lurked.

"Let's go to Lower Dasset as planned," I suggested. "Lunch at the Green Man, eh? Leave this other business on the table."

To my relief the others all agreed. The same impetus as earlier persisted. My convergance upon Lucy, hers upon me, Jon's upon Kirstie, and Kirstie's... she virtually simpered at Jon. Would sleeping with him safeguard her fox from future harm at Lucy's hands? Almost, the fox seemed a mascot of our intentions.

No titled hooker was in evidence at Lower Dasset, though she was still the talk of the inn, and the Green Man's restaurant fulfilled all other expectations. In public we didn't discuss the fox. Afterwards, well fed on poached salmon and pleasantly tipsy, I drove us up through Dasset Country Park. What seemed a modest ascent through woodland opened unexpectedly upon the local equivalent of mountains. Bare sheep-grazed slopes plunged steeply into a broad plain of far fields, copses, distant towns. A stubby stone monument was inset with a circular brass map of the five counties surrounding. Replenishing our lungs in the fresh, sharp air, Jon and I strode along a ridge admiring the view, glowing with a contentment which the enigma back home seemed powerless to dash – on the contrary, with a heightened sense of expectation. Marvellous how one could adapt to, no, capitalize upon the extraordinary. Meanwhile Lucy and Kirstie pored over the map, pointing out tiny landmarks.

"Poker tonight after dinner?" I asked Jon.

"You bet." We enjoyed poker. Bridge was for wimps.

"Afterwards we'll all play a more serious game? If you're game for it?"

"Hmm. I think so. I definitely do. At last."

"Kirstie likes to play that game in the dark – then to be surprised, illuminated!"

"Ah..."

"Don't say I tipped you off. It would seem we'd been swapping locker room tales."

"Quite. Let's get back to our ladies. So what'll we do about that fox?"

"I don't know. Do you?"

"I've been racking my brains. Sell the story to the papers? Our fox mightn't perform. This could end up in the hen's-egg-hatches-frog category; the silly season in midwinter. Maybe Lucy could –?"

"Take it away and slice it up? Destroy it, and find no proof?"

"I suppose there's no sense in alerting authorities. If there are any authorities on phoney animals, what bothers me is the subject could be top secret. If an alien earthwatch is going on, and governments suspect, they could be ruthless. We'd be muzzled, watched, maybe even –"

"Snuffed, to silence us?"

"There's that risk, Pete. Let's leave decisions till later, till we've played our games."

Later: pheasant, and more wine. We had dined around the fox's head which was still perched on the newspaper. The fox made no attempt to snatch mouthfuls of roast bird from our plates, though it continued to appear alive, a mute motionless guest at our board even when Lucy interrogated it, calling into its face like that French doctor addressing the victim of the guillotine. "Who are you, Charley Fox? Where do you come from? Are you recording, even now that you're unplugged?"

Lucy became quite drunk, drunk with a desire to know, to be fulfilled by Charles James. That desire would soon shift its focus. All four of us were members of a tiny secret tribal cult undergoing an initiation featuring wine, a feast, and soon the fever of gambling accompanied by images of kings and queens, and presently sexual rites to bind us all together. An hour later Lucy had the bank, while I had lost all of my original fifty pound stake money. Nothing was left to bet except myself.

"If I lost this time, Lucy, you win me. How about that?"

"Yes!" she agreed, excited. "If that's okay with you, Kirstie?"

"Sure, you know it is. We've been leading up to this."

"Jon?"

He nodded.

When Lucy won, she leapt up, ignoring coins and notes, and gripped my wrist.

"Be off with you then upstairs," said Kirstie, "the both of you. All night long till the morning."

Jon also stood expectantly.

"Ah, Jon, I'd like for us to stay down here by the fireside. The sofa pulls out into a bed." Kirstie was in charge of fires – her hair had affinity with flames – however tonight she had let the wood die down to ash and embers. As I was leaving with Lucy, Kirstie called, "Peter, turn out the lights." Which I did.

In the darkness of the parlour only small patches glowed hot like eyes of wild beasts surprised by a torch beam, watching from the ingle.

"I like it this way," I heard as I closed the door.

Leading Lucy upstairs, I opened the second bedroom, almost as large as our own. It was very warm from the storage heater. I switched on a bedside lamp then killed the light on the stairs, and shut the door. Already Lucy had shaken off her white jacket and was unbuttoning her blouse.



Unexpectedly I found myself embarrassed at being naked in Lucy's unclothed presence. I tended to avert my gaze from the complete spectacle, by pressing close to her. Thus the nakedness that I saw was partial, discreet camera angles on her bare flesh: shoulders, neck, a breast, the top of a knee, a flash of thigh. I couldn't bring myself to pull back and feast my eyes. When Lucy rolled me over in turn to mount me I quickly drew her body down upon myself rather than let her rear upright exultantly. I think she interpreted my hugs as an attempt at even closer, more ecstatic intimacy.

Meanwhile an alarm clock, a time bomb, was ticking away in my brain. Fifteen minutes, twenty, how long?

A squeal from downstairs! That wasn't any orgasmic outcry. Too magnified by far, too full of pain and affront. Another, longer shriek.

"Something's wrong." I pulled loose, seized a sheet to wrap myself.

"You can't just go bursting in on them! Jon isn't rough."

"Maybe it's the fox – I'll check. You wait here."

"While you peep through the keyhole? I'm peeping too." Lucy snatched up a blanket as cloak.

"He isn't rough," she whispered insistently as I padded downstairs ahead of her.

A line of light showed under the parlour door. I heard a sound of weeping, and mumblings from Jon, so I pushed the door open.

A naked man, remarkably hairy around the base of his spine like some huge monkey. A nude woman: plump breasts, freckles, swelling thighs, red bush of pubic hair, Rubens territory I had mapped so often with my fingers, hitherto unseen. Kirstie's hands were splayed defensively not over crotch or bosom but...

Monkey swung round and snarled. "You bastard, Peter!"

From Kirstie's tummy to her left tit sprawled a vivid red birthmark resembling the map of some unknown island once owned by the British and coloured accordingly.

How could I explain that I'd merely wanted to test whether my wife, my comrade, my bed-mate of the last eight years, was a phoney person, an alien life-machine planted in the world to watch us? The idea seemed suddenly insane. Despite the fox, despite. And so now the fox too seemed insane.

Jon and Lucy mounted in silence to the room where we'd made love, and where I'd failed to see her as revealingly as I'd suddenly seen Kirstie. I went upstairs to our bedroom alone, and eventually slept. Kirstie stayed on the sofa by the dead fire.

In the morning, how stilted we were. What minimal conversation at breakfast: no one mentioned the night before. We ate burnt sausages and eggs with broken yolks and avoided looking at each other much, until Jon said, "I think we'd best be going."

Lucy stared longingly for many moments at the fox which Kirstie had transferred to the sideboard, still on the *Cork Examiner*.

"You made sure I couldn't have it, didn't you, Peter?" she accused me. "Seems very small and unimportant now. Yes, let's go."





When the Porsche had driven off, I said, "I was drunk last night."

Kirstie nodded. "I don't believe in divorce, but you shan't touch me again, Peter. You'd best find a girlfriend who won't put your health at risk. I shan't object when you're 'delayed' at the office. We won't sell the cottage, either. We'll come out here on lots of weekends to be lonely together, with Charles James. He must be very lonely. He's lost his body. You've lost mine."

Penance, I thought. A million Hail bloody Marys and no forgiveness. The unforgivable sin is betrayal. Maybe she would soften in time.

**D**uring the next week Kirstie bought a varnished wooden shield from a sports trophy shop, and a Black and Decker drill together with some drill-bits, one of them huge. When we arrived at the cottage on Saturday she told me to mount the shield above the inglenook then drill a fat hole through the middle, drill the hole six inches deep into the stone wall behind.

When I'd done so, she lifted the fox's head and slid its spine into the hole. Held in place thus, neck flush with the plaque, the fox head imitated any other such hunting trophy decorating a pub wall. Except that it was still fresh, still spuriously alive, although utterly unresponsive. By now it reacted to no stimuli at all, a little like Kirstie herself. So it hung there in our parlour, an absurd living idol, dumb dazed undying God of falsity.

**T**ime passes but does it heal us? Last weekend when I entered the parlour, for the first time in months I thought I saw a flicker of movement from the fox, a twitch of an ear, an eyeblink. I began to hope: that it might one day revive, that one day it would eject itself from our wall and try to rejoin, somehow, its lost body. And go away. Then she would have forgiven me.

I even patted the fox encouragingly on the forehead. On impulse I gripped its ears and tugged gently. I would slide it in and out just to give it the idea of resuming a more active existence.

The head wouldn't budge. It was fixed firm. In panic I pulled, but in vain. I realized then that the spine had taken root in the fabric of the building. I imagined tendrils growing out from that spine, threads of clever little cells converting stone and mortar into nerves and organs, spreading along the inside of the wall into other walls, insinuating themselves through the timbers like the fungus threads of dry rot until the head had gained a mutant body of another kind so that we would eat within it, crap within it, sleep within it, though not make love within it.

How I feared the head's revival now. How I dreaded to take an axe to it, causing the cottage to shriek, as Kirstie had shrieked that night.

---

**Ian Watson** (born 1943) has become a regular contributor to *Interzone*. His latest novel from Gollancz, *The Fire Worm*, is an expansion of "Jingling Geordie's Hole" (IZ 17) – by far and away the most controversial story we published in 1986. Also due out this year are two other extravagant Watson fantasies: *Whores of Babylon* (Grafton) and *Meat* (Headline).

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# Terry Pratchett

## Interview by Paul Kincaid

At one point during this interview, when the conversation wound down a little, Terry Pratchett remarked that the problem with interviews is that they end up discussing the interviewer's favourite bits of the books. This, he said, was "mainly because there isn't any surface to get under, I'm an exceptionally shallow person." It is a curious statement from an author whose first story appeared in *New Worlds* when he was still in his teens, and whose *Discworld* novels have established him as one of the most successful and most popular writers of the moment. It is even more curious given the thought he has clearly given to the very serious business of humorous writing.

**When I read a comic novel I always wonder: is the author laughing all the time he's writing it?**

I don't think the author can possibly be laughing all the time because he's close to it, he's working away at it. But there are some things which do make me smile when I'm actually doing it. I think, this one is on target, this one has got to be right.

**How do you work on a novel? Do you get a joke and it grows from that, or do you get an idea and say "How do I make this funny?"**

It tends to be different every time. *Mort* was one that I knew what was going to happen nearly all the time. I knew what the last scene had to be, I wanted to do Luke Skywalker versus Darth Vader in a fantasy setting. I knew it was going to take place in the room of hourglasses, and that was the single image that struck me, the noise, you can hear the lives of everybody in the world passing. I like that as a fantasy image. And there had to be people there, there had to be lives in danger because hourglasses were being smashed. Right, so let's go back and write the novel that's going to end up there.

And the other image I had was Death turning up. I like the idea because it had nice sleek lines, I almost could believe that I was remembering some kind of folk tale. The apprentice who stands there all day because he's too proud to go home, so at midnight it's Death who offers him a job. That could be a Bavarian folk tale for all I know.

Whereas, with *Wyrd Sisters* I had the image of the blasted heath, the storm,

the three figures over the cauldron, the eldritch screech of "When shall we three meet again?" and then there's a long pause before someone says, "Well, I can't make Tuesday."

Right, that's it, I'd instantly begun to define the characters of the three witches. Now let's parody all you can remember about Shakespeare but set it on *Discworld* which gave me an extra degree of freedom. Then further ideas began to unroll themselves automatically. It's almost as if, if you pick the right gag or image right at the start, it opens doors into the next one.

**Is it a matter of thinking up jokes or thinking up situations?**

You think up situations. You don't think up jokes. It sounds chilly to say this but you start thinking, here's the situation and here are the characters, does the situation change if one of the characters is other than you might expect it? So in *Pyramids*, the one I'm working on at the moment, there's a big interview between the king, the high priest and the builder of pyramids. Okay we can have a lot of building pyramid jokes, but how do we do this? The builder of pyramids talks and acts as if he's the local jobbing builder that you have in when you want a garage extension. He's got a yard of sphinxes and statues that he wants to get rid of, and he's got 5,000 workers and his wife does the books. Having created the builder I then found he'd two sons, one's an engineer and the other's an accountant and they have really weird ideas about how you pay for a pyramid, and how you build them, and they've left him behind. So out of that original idea came further things. But most of the gags are because of the characters.

**Do you hear someone's way of speaking and think: Ah, that's the character?**

Certainly. Older people particularly. It was my grandfather who used the word "jometry" to explain everything he knew had a technical explanation but not what that technical explanation was. "Jometry" was a technical word so it's done by "jometry." Some chap who works in a hospital for old people said that's exactly right because he's heard old people say "Oh, that's modern science," and they might as well have used "Black magic." Granny Weatherwax in *Equal Rites* is, in very large measure, my late grandmother,

plus a medley of other old ladies that were around in the village where I grew up, a particular type of old lady who gets to be 70 and realizes that now the world is in her power.

So a lot of the thing is just observation, looking at the characters, and listening to the rhythm of what they say. There's a lot of dialogue in the books. masses of dialogue. I much prefer to have people speaking, normally at cross purposes. If you ever look at most of the conversations any characters have, seldom is anyone really listening to what the other person is saying. They're both thinking busily about something else and they're not really communicating at all. Just like life.

**Is that your favourite sort of humour? One developed out of character?**

It has become so. The characters in the *Discworld* books don't set out to be funny people. They act in a fairly logical way, but in situations where people are not expected to act logically. The barbarian hero is expected to charge in and fight, he isn't expected to run away. So then it becomes funny, but running away in a situation where death is almost a certainty seems a very logical and sensible thing to do.

**In the four *Discworld* novels so far, the plot and the characters have become progressively stronger.**

*The Colour of Magic* was an essay to see how it all went. *Light Fantastic* was effectively more of the same, they were gag books. *Equal Rites* and *Mort* were comic novels. I don't think I lost any readers over them, and I think I gained a new set of readers as well, but I think there were people who were disappointed that what they were getting wasn't more Luggage, more Rincewind, more people running madly in all directions and lots of funny one-liners. So I wrote *Sourcery*, it is, I think, still strong in a novel sense, but it brings back Rincewind and Luggage and it's rather more of a caper. I've almost done that to say to the 14-year-olds who loved the first ones because they were gag books, okay this is to say Thank You. But from now on I want to go a bit stronger on plot and a bit stronger on character, round it out more so I can feel happier with it.

**The early books had a lot of parody of traditional fantasy novels, but upcoming you've got *Wyrd Sisters*, a parody of *Macbeth*, and the novel after that seems to have a scene taken**



**straight out of *Tom Brown's School-days*. Are you running out of fantasy to parody, or do you prefer to just spread your wings?**

Initially I had – targetted is the wrong word because it would suggest entirely the wrong motives on my part – originally I had specific other authors in mind at certain points. I mean, I was slightly annoyed when I read *Wizard of Earthsea* because all the women practitioners of magic in that are either evil or crappy village midwives. I've got absolutely no feminist principles whatsoever but it struck me as slightly wrong.

So, only with that in mind, I wondered what would it be if you had a young female magical practitioner educated by an older female magical practitioner – would that be different? I already had the toolkit as it were, with the Unseen University, to start taking the idea to bits to see how it actually worked. Later, I think, I parodied not specific authors or specific plots, but perhaps general assumptions, general ways of looking at the world. For example, in *Light Fantastic* I parody for about a page and a half a scene from a Conan film merely because at the time it struck me as so laughably outrageous that I said, Let's do it as it really should be. I mean, in some of the Conan books he's 80 and he's still hacking people down with a sword. Well if you can get to 80 and you still have to do that then there's something wrong with your life.

**Haven't got a decent pension plan?**

Well, what's happened to all the jewels? If you've been trampling the jewelled thrones under your sandalled feet, haven't you been picking up the bits and saving them for later.

**You say you have no feminist principles, but *Equal Rites* is often said to be an excellent feminist novel.**

I actually got letters after it went on "Woman's Hour," because Terry is a unisex name, which assumed that I was a woman. The old joke is that I didn't actually reveal the full truth to one gentleman until I could see where the correspondence was going to lead.

I actually wonder if it's really the case. Is it a feminist novel, or is it what people think a feminist novel might be? All that really happened is that a number of the main protagonists are women, and that is it. I don't think it's actually pushing back any feminist boundaries.

Granny Weatherwax would have no time for feminism. She's a great believer in people being people and doing what people want to do. I'm very pleased with *Wyrd Sisters*, which I've just finished. It's the three witches out of *Macbeth* though in a Discworld context. One of them's Granny Weatherwax. There's a little side joke about going to the theatre and going to pubs; you know women of a certain age be-

lieve a woman shouldn't go to pubs alone, shouldn't go to the theatre alone. Now Granny Weatherwax thoroughly approves of this as a basic principle except, of course, that it doesn't apply to her. She's really keen on sending Esk to Unseen University, not out of any fundamental belief in women's rights, but because other people say she shouldn't go. Wizards say she shouldn't go, and so Granny is going to move heaven and earth to send her. She's just going to kick back.

**Do you feel you can use comedy to make statements or get points across?**

I hope that I can't, because I'm not actually in that line of business. There are one or two things that I do believe in really deep down, and maybe they come out, but I don't think it's a good idea for me to be too up-front about them. The only message that comes across is that everything would be a whole lot better if everyone would just shut up and act sensibly for once. Really this is what everyone says and there's no real depth to a message like that. Ultimately I've got to make people laugh, I've also got to give them a few nice images to take away. There's got to be some nice scenery and things like that. But I don't set out to say I want to make a statement here about this and this.

**Do you feel in any way trapped by Discworld?**

Yes and no. This is where I have to make the big statement: Discworld does not exist. It does not exist as a complete entity in my own mind. No complete map of it exists anywhere. I've already put into Discworld things which you have to have a little bit of mental gymnastics to hold together. It doesn't matter. Discworld is a stage on which I can write funny fantasy novels, and in a way the turtle and everything is a kind of hallmark which says to people "Here is a comic novel similar in tone and approach to other comic novels you have read and enjoyed." But I haven't got to restrict myself to the same cast of characters. Discworld has already evolved from something like the Dark Ages to, certainly in Ankh-Morpork, something like Renaissance Florence. Anachronisms get shoved in for jokes. I don't think there's many people who will get every single gag I shove in, but there's lots of people who will get 80 or 90% of them, and there's a different 10% they won't get.

The point is, I'm not trapped in Discworld in the same way that if I'd set out to design a world, an operating ecosystem, then I could get trapped because beyond a certain point I've reached the limits of it. In Discworld, the limits are far more fuzzy. There will come a point, obviously, where I can't do this or can't do that because it goes against everything that the Discworld hitherto has been, but I'll have

to face that when it comes.

If you look at, for example, *Wyrd Sisters* and *Mort* and *Equal Rites* and *Pýramids*, none of them need to be Discworld novels. They are Discworld novels because I knew they were going to be Discworld novels, and a certain amount of Discworld gets put into them. But if a publisher said to me for any reason "This is fine, but we don't want a Discworld novel," and put to me an argument I could comprehend as to why it shouldn't be, I could sit there for a month and with a bit of surgery remove the Discworld and set it separately, and it would all still be there.

**Do you read a lot of fantasy?**

There is an awful lot of fantasy out now, and maybe it's the publishers' blurbs and the cover artists which do them a disservice. I don't read them because they're just not my cup of tea.

**You don't even read it, as it were, in the cause of research?**

Not really, for a fairly specific reason. I'm doing a spoof on a lot of the things that went on in Ancient Egypt. I picked up a few reference books because I was interested, but you don't find out what the facts really were and spoof them, you sit down and think "What is it that I, as an average intelligent person, believe I know about Ancient Egypt?" Don't worry that they never actually found a mummy in a pyramid, with the exception of one possible case, they buried the mummies under the pyramid not in it; people think they were in it. What you think you know and what was really the case are two completely different things, but you do the spoof for the mass of your readers. You spoof all the ideas that they can remember, not all the ideas that you can pull out by doing the research because they're not going to mean anything.

**Do you think writing humorously is harder work than writing seriously?**

Working out all that orbital mechanics stuff? No bloody fear. I've tried it and I actually cannot do it. Sooner or later the characters start acting in such a way, and I can't discipline myself. Then I look at the royalty statements and think, why the hell have I got to bother? I'll stick to what I know.

**You're not the stand-up comic who yearns to play Hamlet?**

No, I'm the stand-up comic who yearns to play Las Vegas.

**Was your first story, in *New Worlds*, comedy?**

Yes. It was actually very good for me that the first story was published, because I don't take failure lightly, and I'd have probably given up. Not long afterwards I got enmeshed in O-levels and A-levels and a job came up on the local paper, and in those days you worked very hard and you worked evenings so you didn't have time to write. Then I was courting and got

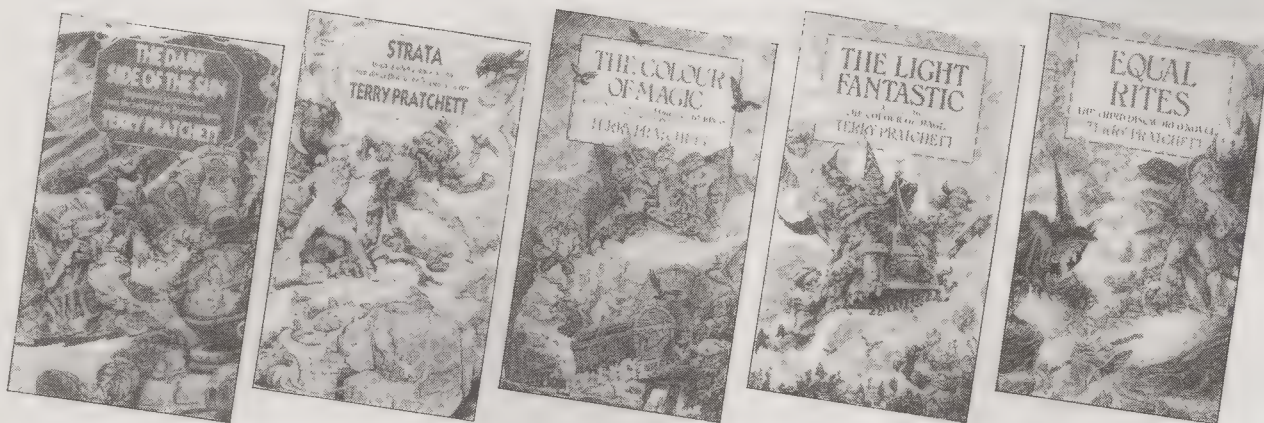


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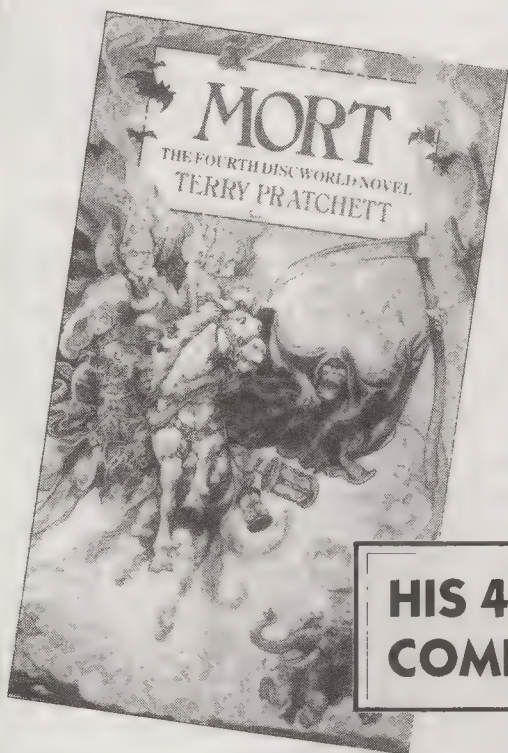
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married. I was writing a novel every five years – *Strata*, *Dark Side of the Sun*, *Carpet People* – they came out, people bought them, and they disappeared into a sort of obscurity. I never really worked particularly hard at it because I just didn't think of it in those lines. Then I did *The Colour of Magic* and it suddenly took off. I went along to the Eastercon in 1985 and I was surrounded by people who actually liked it. It was the first time I came across the concept of there being a readership out there. I was already toying with *Light Fantastic* as a sequel and I thought this might be worth a try.

I'd bought one of the old Amstrad games machines which you could make work as a word processor. From my point of view, it was the breakthrough of my life because I just don't get on with paper very well. With it I could write as fast as I thought. I didn't have to keep winding paper in, or cutting bits of page out and sticking them on other pages to save having to retype. I drove myself to the state where my running average over the last three years is 500 words for every day that goes past, not every day you sit down, which isn't too bad. A lot of it gets chucked away, a lot of it gets cut out in the editing. That doesn't actually matter. It's like panning for gold, you have to shift a lot of shit in order to find one or two nuggets. But unless you actually do shift all that crap you won't ever find them. So I just throw myself at it with a lot of energy, then go back and look at it in the cold light of morning and say, that's a load of rubbish, that can be cut down to one line. But I'm incapable of analyzing it before I write it to make it that one line before I start.

#### **Do you do a lot of rewriting?**

Yes. I only ever do one draft, but with a word processor that's a meaningless term. The novel advances like a caterpillar, the front end is moving all the time, but there are ripples of movement up and down the whole thing. I work on the whole novel at the same time. I've actually gone out and bought a much bigger, faster word processor than an author really needs because I want to work on the whole novel as a unity in one go. You're moving half a megabyte of novel around, and saving and loading and adding things to it. But I think that's the ideal way of doing it.

#### **When you're polishing, do you ever get sick and tired of your own jokes?**

No, because you're one step away from them. You look at it almost as kind of mathematical equation. It's wrong to talk about a calculus of humour but you can look at it and say that's a nice sequence, that's a nice delayed drop, that doesn't work because I haven't quite set someone up sufficiently to make the pratfall as funny as it might otherwise be.

Various friends get copies to read, and I take the comments very seriously. There is no such thing as a bad comment, because if he doesn't think a joke is funny when I did then there's something wrong with that joke, I've got to look hard at it and think: is it because a lot of people will get it and a lot of people won't? – fair enough there's lots of other jokes on that page so it doesn't matter. Or have I done a slip up on something that I thought was funny and the rest of the world doesn't? You don't get too worried about that, but I find it very difficult indeed to work in solitude. Because of the journalist training I suppose. Friends do get rung up and asked questions like "what kind of noise do you think a pyramid makes?" I then say, because this is what I think and this is why I think it. And would you accept this as an argument as to why camels are more intelligent than human beings. You try it out, and it almost becomes a co-operative effort at times.

It was a big eye-opener for me that in the Marx Brothers films, which always give the appearance of absolute spontaneity, the gags were tried and re-tried and honed. They used to take the earlier films out on the road as revues of sketches and guys would sit there with notebooks and time the laughs. And every day they would hone and cut and put new things in. What they ended up with was something that sounded totally spontaneous but people had sweated blood for a couple of months getting that spontaneity exactly right. And I actually approve of the idea. There is nothing wrong with testing your sense of humour repeatedly against other people.

People say if you analyze comedy it doesn't work. It can't be true. It's hit and miss whether you can produce the all-time great belly laugh, but you would be pretty poor at your craft if you couldn't be reasonably certain of a moderate stream of good enough gags. You pick up how your average reader will probably react to things, and how you react to things. It sounds awfully cold to talk about it, and there's no way I can actually sit there and work it out with a slide rule, but after a while you actively begin to pick up a feel for how situations become funny and often it's the particular use of dialogue. You pick up little keys to how the language can be used. It might only produce a stream of mediocre stuff, but it keeps you going while the mechanisms which produce the much better gags work away in the background and keep those fed to you.

I like generally to give people the impression that I just write it and it all gets down on the page and I'm as bewildered about what's going to happen as everyone else is. But really you have a pretty good idea in your mind about

what the shape is going to be, because you wouldn't be doing it otherwise. You just don't know how the detail is going to colour itself in.

#### **How do you work? Do you work set hours?**

Yes, I work all the time. Literally, I take my daughters to school, the word processor gets switched on. Doesn't get switched off again until one in the morning. I might well go away and do other things. I never spend much more than an hour in front of the screen at any one time. I get nervy if I'm more than a few days from it because I think you build up an impetus in writing. Especially in the sort of on-going gag writing which it's not a good idea to go away from. You never put a book to one side and say you'll come back to it in six months time when you've had a chance to think about it. In six months it's dead meat. Whatever fizz that was going on in your brain has been diverted to something else.

Once you start on a book you've got to hang onto it and work it all the way through. You can shunt it sideways while a short story goes past on the fast lane but you haven't got to stop. And you've got to work on it almost in a sense of desperation. I can only work on a kind of nervous energy on books.

I find that about two thirds of the way through a book I actually start thinking about the next one. Some sort of creative node says, Right, that's that one sorted out, it's just journeyman work now. And the little creative node at the back starts looking at what the next one is going to be. It's not a production line, I don't sit there hack writing. But having hyped myself up by continuous effort to the point where I do write fast and continuously, I've got to be writing. If there's ever a period between books, for a fortnight or a week when I haven't quite got the start of the next one together, then my wife starts saying she'll go to her mother's next time because I'm totally unlivable with.

#### **Are there times when you're working on two at the same time?**

Three at the same time has been known. As recently when I was going through the proofs of *Sourcery*, polishing the last draft of *Wyrd Sisters* and was well into the early stages of *Pyramids*. And you had to sit down and think quite hard what you were doing. It's not a bad idea, because with three at once I could make sure that tiny little details meshed in all three.

*Sourcery* is dead meat so far as I'm concerned. It's gone, because I've got a complete book I've done since then and now that's gone. I'm not actually working that fast by the standards of other people, but it just seems like it.

I get awfully puzzled now, I don't know what my stuff is. It's not award-winning stuff but it's stuff a lot of

**Concluded on p.39**



# Christopher Burns

## Babel

I have cleared a platform on the side of the tower, and shored it with beams and a stone lintel. I keep my belongings, and my fire, just inside its lip; here I can sleep and eat. Further within, beneath the crossbeam, the ropes, the pulleys, is the shaft I am sinking. Already it is many times the length of a man. At first there was nothing but rubble, the infill of walls, shattered plaster with a few traces of paint still clinging to it. Then, by good fortune, there was a natural shaft, a brick-lined emptiness that could have been a flue, a store for water, or a drainage channel. The walls were coated with a grimy damp moss that stuck to the hands like mud. The base of the shaft had been sheared away when part of the tower was forced outwards; I hammered in props to prevent further movement, and laboured for what seemed like weeks among the debris. By the light of a lamp fixed in a niche I had cut in the wall I sent up stonework, wood, several bucketfuls of broken pottery, the compressed and stinking remains of carpets, several unidentifiable pieces of metal, a tile with a pleasing pattern. Two days ago I heard sharp cracking noises beneath my feet. I had to lower the lamp to see that was there. Out of the darkness loomed the snapped curves of ribs. It took me a day to dig out the whole skeleton; around its wrist was something made of metal which seemed to have no purpose. But it was tarnished and gleaming, and would be useful to barter at the garden, so I put it among my finds. The skeleton I hauled to the top in bucketloads, then tipped down the slope with the rest of the rubble.

Now I had come to a low, cramped arch. I inspected it carefully with my lamp. The space before was packed with material that could be scooped away quite easily. At my sides and back were huge slabs of unfractured stone; the arch was the only means of progress, and yet I was worried about its strength. When light was held close to it, the stone appeared powdery, fragile, incapable of taking the weight that may rest upon it. If I tapped the arch with my hammer I could see mortar dust showering through the gloom. The way, I decided, would have to be carefully propped. I struggled back to my shelter, fed several staves through the tunnel, and was by nightfall exhausted and depressed. Before I left the arch I took a handful of the soft debris which clogged the area in front of it – damp plaster, wood shavings, a leather strap that could have come from a sandal, a piece of fabric which stayed in the shapes into which it was bent.

During the night two robbers came down the tower. A wooden spar, heavy enough to knock a man sense-

less, came sliding out of the night above my platform, followed by two men with knives and wild, desperate eyes. I was on my feet, crouched with an axe in my hand by the time they were ready to attack. They stood undecided for a few seconds, then turned and went leaping like goats across the black ruins. "Thieves!" I shouted after them, "pirates!" Half a minute later I heard a cry, then the clattering of bricks thrown at them from other workings. One of their shadows crossed in front of a fire further down the slope, and then all was silent.

I slept until dawn, then drank rainwater from the cask I kept on my platform. I used a ladle I had found on a previous dig; it gave the water a metallic taste. I stood at the rim of my platform and looked out across the tower. The slopes are crisscrossed by trails, and I could see men move along them, picking their way among the rubble. At times, after heavy rains, the trails disappear and have to be remade through the slippages of masonry, ash, and spoil.

I left the dig to join the main trail. I have even worn my own thin path down to it, for I always place my feet in exactly the same spots. I thread through a litter of splintered columns, and weave my way along the base of a broken rampart. At one point a sapling has rooted, and its thin trunk gives me a precious handhold. Nevertheless I have considered sawing it down, for if I were to make a find, and am seen taking it to assay, the tree's lone presence on the bare slopes will signal the location of my dig to everyone. On the other hand, were I to be seen sawing it now, others may become suspicious that I have something to hide. It is difficult enough to sleep at night.

The main trail makes its way across a range of buttresses riven by fault lines and onto one of the gardens. The garden must be a fraction of its former size, and is canted; at times bricks shower onto it from above. But here the traders grow their vegetables, the nest robbers sell their birds'-eggs, and sometimes you can buy a scrawny chicken. Here, too, is the trading place for provisions and tools brought up from the plains by mule. And it is here that rumour is exchanged.

All of us who live on the tower are at the very edge of survival, and have to pay with our savings or bargain with the trinkets we pull from the ruins. But all the time we hear of those who have made their fortunes, who have tugged out of the debris a silver crown or a golden shield. Always these are at unspecified parts of the tower; always the news is second-hand, blighted by uncertainty, and none of us ever





knows the man who made the find. Sometimes, though, we become aware that a familiar face is no longer among us. We wonder if he has given up, returned to his wife and family down on the ground; perhaps he is dead within his own workings, a victim of hasty or inadequate propping. Gnawing at us all is the thought that he may have stumbled upon a hoard, made his fortune, gone. We look out over the dim plain and wonder if he is down there, living a life of pleasure and wealth. For we inhabit a place of uncertainty, rumour, unease. Once I saw a man trade a metal anklet for the latest news; whether or not it was true, he would never know.

I walked among the heaps of food, clothing, tools. Each trader has his own language, and yet has adapted to the standardized bartering methods of the tower. All around me people were speaking to each other in low, confidential voices. Someone had seen a whole band of robbers combing the eastern flank; another believed that spirits haunted the ruins, tempting men into impossible tunnels where, trapped, they died slow, lingering deaths; others said that, deep within the conduits, the survivors from the fall still live, driven to incest and cannibalism, and that at night they crawl from their secret entrances to prey upon the diggers. One old man stood at the edge of the trading area, crying like a prophet that the real treasure was neither gold nor silver, but a book whose pages told how the universe was created, and would die. That was why the tower was destroyed, he said; to hide the book as if within a secret cave.

Further along, near the precipice of a brick wall, a man sat with his legs splayed out in front of him and his hands held like a supplicant's. "Once," he said, "the whole plain was alive with men, with machines, with quarries, kilns, pits, forges, foundries. At night, as far as the eye could see, there were roads lit by torches. But the tower aspired to the condition of perfection. In heaven there is an ideal tower, of perfect proportion, design, height, beauty. God could not see his ideal mocked. The tower was razed, the empire fell. That was the end of the golden age. Only its echoes are left, a few faint voices that can still be heard among the ruins. We are left in the darkest of all ages with exhaustion, dissolution, death."

But the man who sells me bread said to me that this was foolish talk. "Why," he said, "those who have returned to the ground say things are just as they were — nothing has got worse. Things always were that way. There is no progress, no decay. The tower was created as it is now, just as limestone is created with the bodies of animals already in it. There was no golden age, no fall. Our memories are as false as whispers in the tower, as meaningless as dreams."

I picked my way across a section of garden that was studded with decorated stones and came to a man selling oysters. "All the way up from the plain," he said; "a long journey, friend; six days or more. They're worth more than you could pay for them."

I offered him the metal wristlet; he turned it in the light. "Well?" I asked.

"If anyone knew what these markings meant..." he said.

"You'll be able to trade it down on the plain."



"Not I, friend. Like you, I have not seen my home for a long time. Like those oysters, this would pass through many hands."

We haggled for a while; eventually I gave him some more pieces of beaten metal in return for six oysters. "There are some," he said, "who speak of the oyster in their explanations."

"I know," I said, weighing them in my hand. "They say that when the tower was first created there was no gold, no precious things within it. But, just as the oyster secretes a pearl around a speck of grit, so the tower secretes wealth in the darkest parts of its fabric."

He leaned forward knowingly. "Do you believe this to be true?"

"Who knows? Perhaps, as we talk, an area of filth is turning into the shape of a tapestry, then into some kitchen appliance – jugs, perhaps, or plates – then into copper or lead or zinc, and finally into silver or gold."

"Seek out the filthiest tunnels and holes, these men say; for there, in conditions like that of the marsh or the sewer, the greatest treasures will lie. There are even those who prophesy that men, too, are subject to the workings of such a law; that out of some squalid hovel a saviour will arise."

I held up the last oyster before I put it into my sack. "You think there will be a pearl in here?"

He smiled without humour. "If so, then come back here, friend, you will get a fair price for it."

I clambered back up through the garden and onto the main path. After a few minutes I thought I heard a voice call my name. It is so long since I have heard my name that I had almost forgotten it myself. I stood still, thinking that my senses had begun to betray me. The broken tower rose above me and fell beneath my feet.

I walked on, heard my name again, and turned to see a man clambering after me. He hobbled as if his leg had been injured. Thinking that this was a lunatic, crazed by his ceaseless work within the ruins, I went faster. Also I was scared, fearing sorcery; at such moments one believes in spirits, demons. Smoke from the other digs rolled across the crumbling face of the tower.

The figure followed me up the path to my dig; I could hear the man's footfall, his wheezing. Ready to strike him, I turned with my hammer in my hand. He held up one hand. "Brother," he said, "I did not know it was you. You have become so old."

I peered closely at the face; it was bearded, lined, dirty.

"Don't be afraid," he said gently.

I lowered the hammer. "Your workings?"

"Shored, disguised; I will be back before nightfall."

I took him into my dig. I still had some bread from the previous day. It was hard, and difficult to chew, but I cut it with my knife and we dipped it in water to soften it. "How many years have we been here?" I asked; "ten?"

"Twenty," he said; then, after a few seconds, added "At least."

I shook my head. "You're wrong."

He nodded slowly, as if it made little difference.

"Our wives and children," I said, and the words faded as I spoke.





"A week's journey away, if they are there at all. What man could leave his workings for that long?"

It was true. Even if our seam was exhausted, we would immediately start another.

I counted out the oysters – three each. "I ate oysters on the night before we left," I said. "I showed my young son how to prise them open with a blade, how to sever the muscle, how to tip the flesh into the mouth. He was all the world to me then. Now I cannot think how old he will be, or what he will look like. I do not know if he is alive."

"Or, like us, scavenging," my brother said, and raised a half-shell to his lips. Juice ran down his chin and he wiped it with the back of his hand. "You have heard that some compare this place to the oyster."

"I have heard so many things I do not know what to believe. Some say that the tower is what it is merely to provide a symbol, a story that will live in the minds of a thousand generations. To what purpose I do not know."

"Yes – and there are those who believe that the tower constantly recreates itself, and that deep within its heart there is a furnace which produces wood, metal, stone, all the bits and pieces of material that a man may find here. Some argue that the coming into existence of shaped wood, worked metal, inscribed stone is irrefutable proof of the existence of God. If we had time, brother, if we had the vision, then we would see the tower slowly recreate itself. In a generation's time, perhaps more, castellated battlements will have formed here, passageways cleared themselves, walls will have unbuckled, buttresses reformed. The tower will break out of this present condition like a butterfly from a chrysalis. And perhaps, in a thousand years time, the tower will fall again."

"And the dead within it?"

"Who knows? Listen to their whisperings within your dig, if you can, but you will learn nothing. Better by far just to watch the fires at night, when the whole black side of the tower resembles a sky lit by stars, and one can feel the universe move all around."

I finished my oysters and laid the empty shells in a small heap at my feet. As in a mirror image, my brother did the same. "Perhaps it does not even make sense to ask such questions," I said.

He nodded pensively. "We do not dig merely for riches. We dig to find out what put us here, and why. To solve the riddle of the tower is to solve the mystery of our own lives. All around us, the theories clash, confuse, and none of us know where to turn."

We sat in silence for a while.

"I must go back," he said.

"Yes."

We had little else to say to each other, and parted without making any agreement to meet again. I watched him as he limped back the way he had come. He did not turn to wave.

When he had vanished I noticed that, opposite my mound of shells, there were three whole oysters, unopened. Until that moment I had thought my brother was alive.

I made my way back down the tunnel to the arch. I pushed the stones with my hammer to see if anything moved, then cleared a space among the detritus. As soft as dried peat, it came away in wedges,

tiny pieces of metal glinting in the dark surfaces. All the time I tried not to think of my brother.

I hammered the props into the arch with a kind of angry precision. The sound of the blows was sharp, and yet it choked within the confined space. Satisfied at last, I dug my way beneath the arch, the headspace narrowing until I was on all fours. The peaty substance was scattered across the floor, and above me was a large seamless slab. I held the lamp up to it and saw that it was as smooth as if it had been worked upon by a master mason.

Wriggling now, I pressed ahead, the space tightening around me until I was breathing in my own breath. All around me I could sense, in the blackness, the terrible weight and mystery of the tower. Then, at last, I came to a stop.

Here, wedged into a tiny space, I felt ahead with my fingers and found great unbreakable slabs of stone, with only the tiniest of gaps between them, as if they had been forced apart infinitesimally.

It was here, unable to go forward or sideways, that I began to hear the voices. Dry as leaves moving across a stone floor, they rustled through the funnels and crevices in the rock. There were men's voices, women's, children's; I could hear them clearly, and yet could not understand the languages that they spoke. Always approaching me, yet never arriving, they whispered down the thin spaces; always I thought that I would grasp something – a phrase, perhaps even just a word – but I could not. They did not cease, did not move away, but went on all around me, an eerie whispering babble that resisted all understanding.

I lay silently in the dark until the lamp went out.

**Christopher Burns**, who lives in Cumbria, is the author of the intriguing novel *Snakewrist* (Cape, 1986) – recently reissued in Paladin paperback. The above is his fourth story in *Interzone*, and all his short pieces to date are collected in a new volume entitled *About the Body* (Secker & Warburg).

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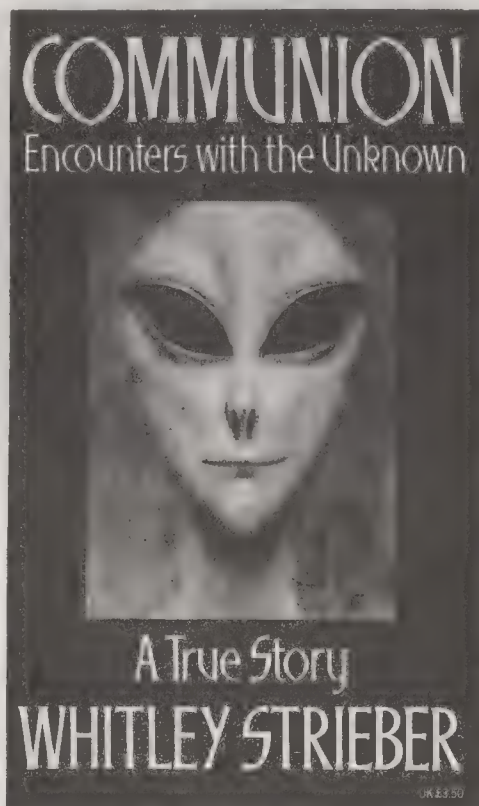


# The Village Alien

## Thomas M. Disch

If Whitley Strieber isn't fibbing in *Communion* (and the book's cover boldly affirms that it is "A True Story"), then it must be accounted the most important book of the year, of the decade, of the century, indeed, of all time. For what Strieber recounts in *Communion* is nothing less than the first contact of the human race, in the person of Whitley Strieber, with an ancient alien civilization that abducted him from his cabin in the Catskills on the nights of October 4 and December 26, 1985 (and on various other occasions over the years), and took him aboard a flying saucer, where he communicated with a variety of alien beings and was subjected to surgical and sexual indignities. To cover their tracks the alien abductors then implanted false "screen memories" in Strieber's mind (as they have been doing, he has come to suspect, throughout his life). Only later, in March 1986, did hypnosis reveal the true character of what had happened to him.

There have been other, similar reports of UFO sightings and contact with aliens, but Strieber's is unique in two important respects. First, as he notes himself, "If mine is a real experience of visitors, it is among the deepest and most extensive yet recorded." Second, this is the first time a best-selling author has written his own extensive, firsthand account of a UFO experience. Strieber's early novels were horror stories, taking traditional figures like werewolves (*The Wolfen*, 1979) and vampires (*The Hunger*, 1981), and placing them in contemporary urban settings. Both books became successful movies. Two later science fiction novels were written as collaborations with James Kunetka: *Warday* (1984) is a fictional "documentary" of nuclear holocaust, and *Nature's End* (1986) treats global ecological catastrophe on a similar panoramic scale. *Communion* seems the end of a logical progression, leading Strieber from the fiction side of the best-seller list to the nonfiction side. That assumes that *Communion* will make it onto the list, but with a \$1 million investment in the book, William Morrow would seem to have confidence in its success.



Jacket illustration © 1987 by Ted Jacobs

Sceptical readers (and I freely confess that I began as one) may feel that the million-dollar advance paid for the book is in itself reason to doubt the good faith of the author. For there certainly could be writers who might be tempted for such a price to invent such a tale out of whole cloth and swear to its truth. Strieber does not address this question directly in his book, but he makes it clear that he deplores charlatany and pseudoscience, and those who profit from the public's credulity:

*One of the greatest challenges to science in our age is from modern superstitions such as UFO cults and people who are beginning to take instruction from space brothers. Charlatans ranging from magicians to "psychic healers" have tried to gather money and power for themselves at the expense of science. And this is tragic. When one looks at the vast dollars that go each year to the astrology industry and thinks what that money would have done for us in the hands of astronomers and astrophysicists, it is possible*

*to feel very frustrated. Had the astronomers been awash in these funds, perhaps they would have already solved the problem that I am grappling with now. I respect astrology in its context as an ancient human tradition. Still, I wish the astronomers could share royalties from the astrology books.*

Strieber is aware that there will be those who may doubt what he is saying, and even admits: "I did not believe in UFOs at all before this happened. And I would have laughed in the face of anybody who claimed contact." He maintains, furthermore, that until impelled by his own experience to examine other UFO literature, he had taken no interest in such matters. If he had read widely in the literature, the striking correspondences between his own UFO experience and that recorded by others could be ascribed to imitation. A case in point: *Science and the UFOs* by Jenny Randles and Peter Warrington, a book that by happy coincidence he'd received from his brother at Christmas of 1985, just hours before the visitation of December 26. He did not read it at once, for "I was surprised to find that *Science and the UFOs* frightened me. I put it aside with no more than the first five or six pages read." Later, however:

*I finally finished Science and the UFOs. Toward the end of the book I was astonished to read a description of an experience similar to my own. When I read the author's version of the "archetypal abduction experience," I was shocked. I was lying in bed at the time, and I just stared and stared at the words. I, also, had been seated in a little depression in the woods. And I had later remembered an animal. [A screen memory.]*

My first reaction was to slam the book closed as if it contained a coiled snake.

Throughout the book, the correspondence between Strieber's and other contactees' experiences constitute one of the main criteria offered for our believing that Something Must Be



Happening, something bigger than Whitley Strieber:

What may have been orchestrated [by the aliens] with great care has not been so much the reality of the experience as public perception of it. First the craft were seen from a distance in the forties and fifties. Then they began to be observed at closer and closer range. By the early sixties there were many reports of entities, and a few abduction cases. Now, in the mid-eighties, I and others – for the most part independent of one another – have begun to discover this presence in our lives.

Even though there has been no physical proof of the existence of the visitors, the overall structure of their emergence into our consciousness has had to my mind the distinct appearance of design.

There does, indeed, appear to be a design, but could it not be accounted for by the tacit collusion of the witnesses? Of course, we have Strieber's assurance that he was innocent of earlier testimony until his own experiences prompted him to do research. But by his own account Strieber's memory is an erratic instrument, due (it may be) to the aliens' implanting, virtually on an annual basis, of false "screen memories," the weeding out of which constitutes a very large part of Communion:

Many of my screen memories concern animals, but not all. I remember being terrified as a little boy by an appearance of Mr Peanut, and yet I know that I never saw Mr Peanut except on a Planter's can. I said that I was menaced by him at a Battle of Flowers Parade in San Antonio, but I now understand perfectly well that it never happened. For years I have told of being present at the University of Texas when Charles Whitman went on his shooting spree from the tower in 1966. But I wasn't there.

Then where was I? And what is behind all the other screen memories?

Perhaps on some level I do know. Maybe that's why I spent so much time peeking into closets and under beds. If I really face the truth about this behaviour, I must admit that it has been going on for a long time, although in 1985 it became much more intense. Now that I have uncovered these memories, though, it has ended completely.

As a matter of fact, I cannot remember a time in my life when I have felt as well and as happy as I do now.

That is not to say that Strieber's life has been untroubled since the surfacing of the aliens. Communion records so much distress, suffering, agony, anguish and pain that in undertaking to write of the book I dreaded to think

that I might be adding to it by taking a tone that would suggest that I am scoffing at the author. Strieber has had the same dread and in his introduction cautions against making light of "people who have been taken by the visitors": "Scoffing at them is as ugly as laughing at rape victims. We do not know what is happening to these people, but whatever it is, it causes them to react as if they have suffered a great personal trauma. And society turns away, led by vociferous professional debunkers whose secret fears apparently close their minds." Here is a sampling of the sufferings, both physical and mental, that Strieber has had to endure.

[Aboard the saucer] the next thing I knew I was being shown an enormous and extremely ugly object, gray and scaly, with a sort of network of wires on the end. It was at least a foot long, narrow, and triangular in structure. They inserted this thing into my rectum. It seemed to swarm into me as if it had a life of its own. Apparently its purpose was to take samples, possibly of fecal matter, but at the time I had the impression that I was being raped, and for the first time I felt anger.

My wife reports that my personality deteriorated dramatically over the following weeks. I became hypersensitive, easily confused, and, worst of all, short with my son... I had a feeling of being separated from myself, as if either I was unreal or the world around me was unreal. By December 28 I was so depressed and in such a state of inner conflict that I sat down and wrote a short story in an effort to explore my emotions... I called it "Pain".

This story appears in an anthology of horror stories edited by Dennis Etchison, Cutting Edge, and a most revealing exploration it is. See below.

[After hypnosis by Dr Donald Klein] I recalled seeing a landscape with a great hooked object floating in the air, which on closer inspection proved to be a triangle. Then there followed a glut of symbolic material, so intense that even as I write I can feel how it hurt my whole brain and body to take it all in. I don't remember what this was – triangles, rushing pyramids, animals leaping through the air.

Are such experiences the source of the performance anxiety that has been detected in psychological tests I have taken, or does that have to do with the many recollections I have always had of sitting in the middle of a little round room and being asked by a surrounding audience of furious interlocutors questions so hard they shatter my soul?

Finally, this *cri de coeur*, wrested from

the author during hypnosis as he relives his examination by the aliens aboard the saucer. Dr Klein has asked, "Are they paying attention to you?" and Strieber replies,

"Yes. There's one of them now sitting down in front of me staring right at me, and she's completely different from the others. The others are all very small people. This one is tall and thin. And she's sitting down. She's all gangly. I don't know what to make of that. I don't know what to make of this. Where the hell – how the hell – you know, it's like I can't see. I just don't know what the hell to make of this. It's just impossible. It's totally impossible. It can't be like this."

What the aliens are actually up to zipping around in their UFOs and inserting probes into the orifices of selected citizens never becomes very clear. Although he often has had the opportunity, Strieber rarely has the presence of mind to ask his aliens where they come from or what their intentions are. Once they volunteer the information: "You are our chosen one." A more ambitious chosen one than Strieber might want to know what such an announcement portends. Does it mean he is the single person chosen from the whole human race to be the aliens' go-between? If so, what an awesome destiny! But Strieber declines to speculate, though the bulk of the book is given over to his speculations: whether the visitors come from outer space or from some other dimension; whether they are archetypes or ancient gods conjured up from the communal unconscious; whether their natures are insectlike; and questions even more improbable:

What might be hidden in the dark part of my mind? I thought then that I was dancing on the thinnest edge of my soul. Below me were vast spaces, totally unknown. Not psychiatry, not religion, not biology could penetrate that depth. None of them had any real idea of what lives within. They only knew what little it had chosen to reveal of itself.

Were human beings what we seemed to be? Or did we have another purpose in another world? Perhaps our life here on earth was a mere drift of shadow, incidental to our real truth. Maybe this was quite literally a stage, and we were blind actors.

Perhaps. Who can say? Perhaps I only dreamt I read Strieber's book. Perhaps James Landis at Morrow only dreamt he paid a million dollars for it. Or perhaps (it occurred to my ever-sceptical mind) human beings are what they seem to be, and Whitley Strieber is embroidering the truth. Certainly in the last passage quoted he looks



remarkably like a hack writer padding out a thin story with a lot of guff. Some novelists do that. Even Whitley Strieber. Perhaps (we ought to at least consider the possibility) he is making up the whole story just as if he were writing fiction! Novelists, especially horror novelists, know all kinds of ways to make the implausible seem plausible. It's what they're paid for.

Another thing novelists have been known to do is to enlarge, develop or inflate a short story they have written to novel length. Sometimes they do this because they feel the story's theme has not been fully realized; sometimes simply because they have no better hook to hang the next novel from. If *Communion* were a novel and not *A True Story*, anyone who had also read the short story "Pain" would feel certain that there was such an acorn-to-oak relation between the two works, and for that reason it is worth examining in detail. It begins with a professional narrative hook: "When I encountered Janet O'Reilly I was doing research into the community of prostitutes." The narrator is circumstanced much like Strieber himself: he is a professional novelist living in Greenwich Village with his wife and three children (Strieber himself has one child, a son, age 8, who is reported in *Communion* to have shared, with Strieber and his wife, in some of the close encounters the book describes).

*For my new book [the narrator relates], to be called Pain, I wanted to know not only about prostitution but also about the various perversions that attach themselves to it. There are sexual desires so exploitative that people will not gratify them without being paid even in our exploitative society. These have to do for the most part with pain and death. For death is connected to sexuality – witness the spider. Who hasn't wondered what the male spider feels, submitting at the same time to the ecstasy of coitus and the agony of death?*

There follows a male spider's précis of Western culture, from the ritual sacrifice of kings and Roman emperors to Hitler's death camps and the Kennedy assassination. Then comes a fairly extensive consideration of "ufology," which is surprising in view of Strieber's claim in *Communion* that he had not been concerned with such matters at the time "Pain" was written – and had, indeed, been a sceptic. The narrator of "Pain," by contrast, sounds quite convinced that *Something Is Happening*:

*There is evidence all around us of the presence of the hidden world. We reject it, though, as silliness and foolery.*

*Because it knows that this hidden civilization feeds on us, the government does everything possible to hide reality. It does not want us to know that our lives, our culture, our very history has been designed for the purpose of causing suffering, and that there is nothing whatsoever that any of us can do to relieve ourselves of this burden.*

I was astonished to see in 1983 that NSA had been approached by CAUS (Citizens Against UFO Secrecy) under the Freedom of Information Act to divulge what it knows about UFOs. Officially, the government has made a massive effort to debunk the whole notion of "flying saucers," either claiming that they are all hoaxes or misperceptions.

After these discursive preliminaries the story begins again at its first beginning:

*I met Janet O'Reilly at the Terminal Diner at the corner of Twelfth and West streets in Greenwich Village. I was there because of my research. The Hellfire Club is nearby, a haunt of New York's sadomasochistic community. I particularly wanted to connect with some of the people who went there to make money. I wasn't interested in the compulsive participants, but rather in the men and women who preyed on them.*

Well, one thing leads to another, and before he knows it the narrator has been lured to Janet's apartment, "a miserable filthy cellar on Thirteenth Street," where the library contains books by Proust and Céline. She invites him to crouch at her feet, and when he demurs she kicks him in the chest. She is verbally abusive: "Unlike you, I don't lie about myself. Now you're here and you're still having difficulty in submitting." Eventually, however, he comes around, only to learn this sorry wisdom:

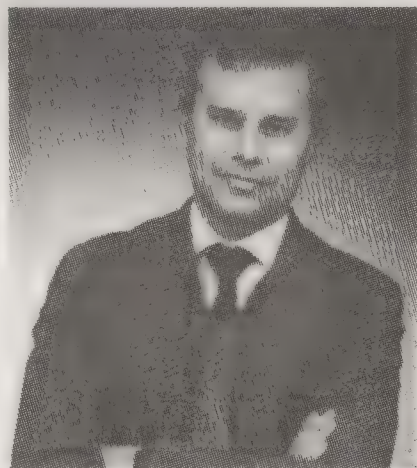
*When I go to her and submit myself, a part of my suffering will be the certain knowledge that all of their lives [i.e., his wife and children] will be damaged by my act. My pain will be infinitely greater for their understanding that it will lead to theirs. To know that you will cause grief to those you love is a very hard thing.*

As *True Stories* go, "Pain" has more of a ring of truth than *Communion*, but possibly that is because Strieber has had more experience as a writer of fiction than of nonfiction. It is at times hard to remember that Janet O'Reilly is an alien and not just a fly-by-night dominatrix. The narrator's visit to her flying saucer is over almost before it begins. One minute he's having a beer behind a cabin (how life does imitate

art), and then: "The next thing I knew I was in a tiny, droning airplane with Janet. At first I didn't recognize her. Then I saw that she was flying the plane, watching me out of the corner of one eye. She spoke in a language I could not quite understand."

The textual parallels between "Pain" and *Communion* are even more extensive and systematic than this précis can indicate, but it would be hard to deny the virtual identity between the fictive Janet O'Reilly and the nameless alien who abducts Strieber and, in one rather breathless paragraph of hypnotic transcript, has something like sex with him.

There are two ways I can think of to account for this. The first is that Strieber, having made the imaginative equation between the "archetypal abduction experience" and the ritual protocols of bondage and domination, realized he'd hit a vein of ore not pre-



Whitley Strieber (photo credit: Unangst)

viously tapped by ufologists, who have been generally a pretty naïve lot. To have drawn such an explicit parallel in *Communion*, however, would have risked alienating the audience at which such a book is targeted, and so among Strieber's many speculations there are none that examine or allude to the metaphorical premise of the story and its relevance to the "abduction experience," a relevance that is only to be found, once again, beneath the longer narrative's surface, like a prize bone dug up and then reburied.

A second possible explanation is that the story represents the first surfacing of materials repressed by the aliens, who had, only days before the story's writing, taken Strieber aboard their saucer and given him such a hazing. This is undoubtedly the explanation Strieber would adopt if the question should ever come up, though in *Communion* he is content to let that sleeping dog lie.

That Strieber appreciates that "Pain" poses an awkward question was confirmed early this morning [Monday, February 23] by a telephone



call from Strieber in Chicago, the latest stop on his extensive promotional tour. He had earlier agreed to be interviewed in New York on Saturday, but then called to cancel that meeting. I decided to begin this essay without benefit of speaking with Strieber, but I still wanted to know more about the chronology of the composition of story and book. Yesterday, to that end, I telephoned Dennis Etchison, in whose anthology "Pain" appeared, and asked when Strieber had been solicited for a story and when Etchison had received the completed manuscript. There was nothing in the dates to contradict Strieber's account, and Etchison was full of praise for his friend and contributor (who had been "a national debating champion and studied for fifteen years with the Gurdjieff Foundation"), and for "Pain," confiding that Strieber had told him that he regarded it as "a major turning point in my life and career."

Etchison inquired for what magazine I was writing my piece: *Omni*? I had to admit it was *The Nation*, and this produced a resonant silence and an expressed wish that his remarks were all off the record. I would certainly have complied with his wish if he had not himself at once sent out an SOS to Strieber, who then left the following message on my answering machine:

Tom, it's Whitley at 8:30 on Monday morning. I'm calling you from Chicago. I still have got time problems. I also understand from other people who you've talked to that you're planning what is apparently a really vicious hatchet job on *Communion*, and I'm not sure I even want to talk to you about it. It's an awful, ugly, terrible thing to do. The book is so obviously from the heart! To think that it was written for money – it shows an absolute lack of sensitivity, and also a lack of understanding of the book market. You know, the book was turned down by its original publisher [Warner], and I had to write it knowing it had no publisher. The fact that I got...a good price for it is...I shouldn't be punished for that, Tom, nor should the people that this strange experience – [Here the machine stopped recording.]

About an hour later, he called again, and this time I was doing my own answering. Without any prompting or argument, Strieber repeated his reproaches, deploring all those flaws in my character that he'd first observed when I'd taken over the PEN table from him at the 1985 Small Press Fair at Madison Square Garden. Even from our brief time-filling conversation he'd sensed a lack of human decency and feeling that had made him feel...sorry for me, nothing but that. He suggested that it was not too late to show some

elemental respect for human feelings, that I didn't have to subject him to the agony my essay would surely cause. When he'd lost his first head of steam, I pointed out that, not having read what I'd not finished writing, he was arguing with straw men. No, he said he could tell where I was heading just from my condescending tone of voice, and from the questions I'd been asking about "Pain." It became clear that "Pain" was a sensitive area, and without my having to state my sense of its relevance, Whitley volunteered his own, which corresponded to the "second possible explanation" given above, that the story had just bubbled up from his subconscious as a result of his encounters with the aliens. It wasn't the acorn, so to speak, but the first little oak.

What Whitley could not have imagined at that moment (and what I certainly was not going to tell him after so many minutes of vituperation) was that I was no longer a sceptic about UFOs, that, in fact, in the course of writing this essay I have been in contact with alien beings, and though my aliens – the Winipi (pronounced Weenie-pie; singular, Winipus) – are not of the same race as those in touch with Strieber (who are known, and feared, throughout the galaxy as the Xlom), they, the Winipi, are well-informed of the purposes of the Xlom and the grave danger they represent.

However, before I relate what I've learned about the Xlom and their human minions, I should give an account of how I encountered the Winipi and was taken aboard their flying saucer. It was on the same Saturday I was to have seen Strieber. I had gone downtown to get coffee at my favourite coffee store on Bleecker Street, and, realizing that I was only a few blocks from the address Strieber had given me to call it, I thought I would see where he lived. It was a brick building larger than a brownstone but smaller than the massive piles of Washington Square Village, which it faces. Its facade was panelled at ground level with squares of black slate, and the lower doors and windows were secured with heavy ornamental iron gratings. On an impulse I went down the short flight of steps and entered the foyer. I pushed the buzzer marked "Strieber," thinking that he might find time to see me after all. No response. I pressed the buzzer a second time, and as I released it I felt a strange shuddering vibration pass over me, which I ascribed at that time to static electricity.

Leaving the foyer, another unconsidered impulse made me turn right (instead of left, toward home), and within minutes I found myself beside a fenced-in quarter-acre of wasteland, which a signboard declared to be a

"Time Landscape." The sign went on to explain that this was "An environmental sculpture of a primeval forest, showing how this area looked in the fifteenth century." If the Time Landscape was any clue, Manhattan was in pretty sorry shape in the fifteenth century. Stunted oaks, scrawny maples, a few empty beer cans and a broken umbrella contested with one another for the parched bare dirt.

In the middle of this primeval squalor I observed a strange phenomenon, which at first I assumed to be no more than a metallic-hued Frisbee gliding slowly in a long curve through the sickly branches of the dying shrubs. But why did it not reach the end of its trajectory? Why did it seem to hover inches above my head, emitting a pallid cinnamon-scented effluence? [Strieber notes that the scent of cinnamon is often associated with alien contact.] Why did I seem to hear an eerie contralto voice whispering in my ear, "Sleep! gigantic Terran, sleep!"?

And then, nothing, blackness, snores. I awoke *inside* the wire enclosure of the Time Landscape with my green spiral notebook lying beside me in the dirt. And Strieber's words were echoing in my ears: "I don't know what to make of this. I don't know what to make of that." I walked home in a daze. I dined in a trance. I went to bed in my pyjamas – and when I awoke, that same eerie contralto I'd heard earlier ordered me, in implacable accents: "Go to your desk."

The next morning, after breakfast, I discovered that I had filled an entire floppy disk with what must be thought of as a kind of automatic word-processing. Are the words on the disk my own writing? I cannot say. They are on the disk. A brief prefatory note declares that they were written on "Washington's Birthday, February 22, 1987, 3:34 A.M.: I cannot tell a lie!" They seem to be the transcript of the dialogue I had carried on with my abductors on the previous afternoon. They are, like Strieber's transcriptions of his testimony under hypnosis, unedited:

**M**e: Where am I? Who are you? What's happening?

Winipus I: [Giggles; then] Hello, Terran. You are in the Time Landscape on La Guardia Place between Bleecker and Houston, aboard our spacecraft, Winipi Frisbee IV. Welcome! And what is happening, Terran, is your own archetypal abduction experience [More giggles; scurrying sounds; a burp].

Winipus II: [Speaking in a deeper masculine voice, with a strong scent of peanuts on his breath] Welcome to the club. Just as Whitley warned you, right there in the endpapers of his book, "Don't be too sceptical: somewhere in your own past there may be some lost



hour or strange recollection that means that you also have had this experience."

Me: I can't believe this! I'm in your flying saucer. But it was no bigger than a Frisbee.

Winipus I: That is because we Winipi are no bigger than peanuts. The tallest of us is not quite one centimetre. We had to use our shrink-blasters to get you inside the ship.

Me: [Confused] Shrink-blasters? But Strieber doesn't say anything about shrink-blasters. This is some kind of practical joke, isn't it? You're not aliens. You're – Oh my God, no! I see you now! I smell you! You're... Mr Peanut! It wasn't a screen memory that Strieber had. You were at the Battle of Flowers Parade in San Antonio!

Winipus II: We were there, yes, but we weren't threatening him. We were trying to save him from the Xlom. You see, Terran – do you mind if we call you Tom? You see, Tom, there are two alien races, us and the Xlom. The Xlom are, as Whitley intuited, humanoid insects with a hive mind. They have only one goal in their group mind, one all-consuming purpose, one hunger that drives them from star system to star system – Arcturus, Antares, Vega, Venus and now Earth. They want money.

Me: Money? But if they're aliens...?

Winipus I: [Twirling his cane] It's ridiculous, isn't it? Why would a Xlom need dollars? We've never understood that side of their characters. We only know they're insatiable, and utterly without a sense of humour.

Winipus II: That's why we have been following them everywhere through the universe. Because what we Winipi love more than anything else is comedy. The Xlom are just so funny. And in combination with you earthlings! I mean, what you never said in all those pages about Whitley's wonderful book is how funny it is. It's a classic, right up there with McGonagall's poetry or the Ninja thrillers of Eric Van Lustbader. Caviar, absolute caviar!

Me: But if what he says is true, then it isn't that funny. Clumsily written perhaps, but there's a point to all his nebulous fears. He may be in grave danger, if –

Winipus I: [Chuckles] Oh, it's much too late to save Whitley from the Xlom! He's one of them now himself. Surely you've seen *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Well, that's what the Xlom have done with Whitley. All those sessions of forced feeding that he reports? That's how it was done. Whitley's consciousness now is 95 percent Xlom. Even back at the parade in San Antonio it was too late to help him.

Me: Wait a minute. Why would the Xlom be letting Whitley reveal all their secrets? That's the major logical objection to his book in the first place: if the aliens are so wise and powerful, why



**Tom Disch** (photo: Jamie Spracher) is a [characterization deleted] like Strieber their "chosen one"?

Winipus II: First, there was money to be made, and as we've explained, the Xlom will do anything for money. They nearly became extinct a millennium ago when they began selling their children to the Arcturians for spare parts. But that's a separate story. There's not just the money for the book. There are already movie offers. Whitley's certain to write a sequel. And there's an outside chance he can get a whole cult going for himself on the order of that woman in Washington, the one who's been reincarnated so many times. Didn't you notice that *Communion's* last page is an invitation to write to Whitley at 496 La Guardia Place? What better way for the Xlom to make mass conversions of humans into Xlom minions? As to his book letting the Xlom's cat out of the bag, do you believe most sensible people will believe it? Of course not. Oh, talk show hosts treat him politely enough. In the broadcast time allotted to Silly Season celebrities like Strieber, they're content to let him tell his tall tale, take his bow and head back to the airport. A wink and a smile will convey their sense of what kind of goods are being sold. But to call him to account would be like trying to swim in a swamp. It's more than they're paid for. As for what we've revealed to you, your readers will just dismiss the whole thing as satire, a story you've invented as a demonstration of how easy it is to make up any nonsense and call it *A True Story* as long as its only probative basis is the good faith of someone who'll swear he's not lying.

Here the transcript of my conversation with the Winipi breaks off. I can dimly recall other things that took place aboard the Winipi Frisbee IV, including a gruelling tap-dancing lesson with a large group of Winipi, for which I was forced to wear a Mr Peanut costume. (My feet hurt terribly the next day, so strange as this memory seems, I know it must be true, and not a screen memory.) I also learned the names of many other humans who have, like

Whitley Strieber, been transformed into Xlom. Some of the most notable or notorious figures in modern society are Xlom, from Wall Street arbitragers to movie stars and high-ranking White House officials! The Xlom are everywhere, and there is no way they can be detected except with the Xlom-detecting technology developed by the Winipi – which I alone, of all humanity, have been entrusted with! After the Winipi had tuned the Xlom-detector (which is in itself undetectable) to my neural patterns, and as I was about to leave their saucer and be de-shrunk, one of them said to me, "You are our chosen one."

And then they laughed!

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The above essay first appeared in the American journal *The Nation*, and it is reprinted here with the author's permission. The editors of *The Nation* describe Thomas M. Disch as "an expert on the paranormal, unlikely stories and silly people."

Whitley Strieber's *Communion: A True Story* was first published in the USA in 1987 by William Morrow and Company. It is currently available in Britain as an Arrow paperback, price £3.50.

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# Peter T. Garratt

## Our Lady of Springtime

**“I**’d expected you to be down at the protest.”  
“That would be more my wife’s scene. It’s too late to make any real difference, so I’m not involved this time.”

Marshall was disconcerted: not having met a police sergeant he considered educated, let alone trusted, he never knew how to take Cranage’s approaches. He added firmly: “I certainly don’t approve of what’s being done on the wetlands, but I’m in no position to take time away from my farm. I literally can’t afford to get into trouble.”

“Mrs Marshall’s down there, is she? I haven’t met her.”

“Petra saves bigger fish. She’s on the Greenpeace boat.”

“I’d have thought you’d need her help here, to keep this place going.” Cranage sometimes adopted a trace of West Country accent, which vanished when unguarded, adding to his air of one who played a role, who knew the end of the scene.

“She does what she believes. We had the same objectives, but didn’t make as good a team as we hoped.” The horse, Goodwood Attahualpa Capac, skittered briefly, and Marshall was able to plan his words while calming him. “At first, we both saw a self-sufficient organic farm, as a valid protest against the way modern life is specialized into alienation, choked with chemicals. I’m well on the way to achieving effective, practical, self-sufficiency. That wasn’t enough for Petra...she didn’t like the odd compromise I found we had to make, to get through. And she wanted to be in the front line.”

“Some of your pals seem to think the front line’s just down the road. I’m not quite clear why there’s such a fuss about a peat bog. It’s not an attractive environment...it’s on the dangerous side in bad weather.”

“The wetland is a home for innumerable species; useful herbs, insect-eating birds, odd little creatures whose role in the eco-system we don’t even understand yet. And may never before it’s too late.” Holding forth, he sensed anger become tension; in this situation, struggled extra to control it.

“The interdependence of all things, eh. They are keeping the road to the edge of the Moss; you people achieved that.” Cranage paid more attention than he cared to show, but did not seek an argument. “The archaeologists, they’re happy, looking for remains in the peat...it preserves things, you know. Must be along. Hope we don’t have to pull any of your friends in.”

Until the car was out of sight, Marshall rode slowly, inspecting his perimeter fence. Then, he gave At the signal for a real gallop, careering past the rendezvous, not able to relax till they were nearly at the house, so he had to turn and canter smartly back to meet Mink.

She was pretty in a well-scrubbed way, wearing shapeless green garments, with an incongruous red ribbon in her hair. He didn’t know her real name.

“Hi. You were galloping as if you’d seen the Wild Hunt.”

“Cranage. Poking his nose in, asking questions.”

“Don’t worry. He talks to everyone. I don’t think he’s picked anything up.”

“I hope not. How’d it go, over there?”

“We managed to sit down in front of the bulldozers, and the first time they just lifted us away, quite gently really. Better than Greenham, anyway. Then just a couple ran back, as we’d planned, and they got arrested.”

“So they’ll think they’ve drawn our teeth?”

“I hope so. Did you get the frequency?”

“Yes. They’re using one for all operations. I’ve got most of the call-signs.”

“Good. We need to know more about the security on those dozers.”

“I’ll be up all night working. And listening. Be in the ‘Dolmen Stone’ tomorrow after market.”

**R**iding home, Marshall noticed At blowing hard, limping slightly. The bay stallion had once been healthy, but since his mate, New-market Emily Zatopec, had gone into unexpected foal, and died, while working the plough, he had been prone to irritating problems, fit only for the lightest work.

Petra had reacted badly to the loss of her horse. It had been then that her attitude to animals entered the stage which he regarded as fanatical, and detrimental to their work on the farm. Before, she had inspired him to revel in being first in the equal love she bestowed on all creatures. His sounder judgement had bowed to her insistence, that they buy the failed racehorses, for whom butchers were bidding, rather than sturdier breeds, which stood a better chance of good homes.

She was reluctant to use horses for work again, and furious when he spent the last of his own money on the shires. She mollified a little when they thrived, while it was becoming clear that a tractor was out of the question.

The thought of Petra reminded him that At was still



limping, and he guiltily dismounted, walking him gently back.

After attending to the animals, Marshall took a brief supper, turned on the CB, and started preparations for the next day's market. The windmill which powered his generator also served the traditional purpose of grinding corn. (As it was early in the season for fresh produce, he would mainly be selling baked goods.) He filled a dozen bottles from the last brew of bitter, decided the old ale was too sour for anything but slug traps, took a few minutes to put them down.

Occasionally, his work would be interrupted by the voices of security men: making notes in his own shorthand was a distraction, but not long after midnight the farm and market work was done, at least until baking time. After washing, and grinding some coffee, which he took with honey and fresh unskimmed milk, he decided to devote a few hours to his paper.

"Problems of the Vegan Philosophy" had already taken too much of the limited time he had available for writing. Articles on practical aspects of organic farming and self sufficiency, which might have earned a little money, had slowly moved onto a dusty pile of poems, sketches for stories, and half-finished, time-expired, letters to newspapers, none of them in fair copy. Yet he could not emancipate himself from the endless rite of amplifying and revising his argument. It was a debt he owed to Petra, that although he could not share the full rigour of her philosophy, he would shoulder the burden of explaining it to the world, justifying his reservations. Time after time he felt he had found the right form of words, the perfect density and weight of argument: yet a few minutes of reflection would bring her impassioned voice into his mind, angrily denouncing the shabby and inhuman compromises he had been justifying.

As always, science and philosophy slipped away, and the lost past let flow: Petra's kindness to diseased or abandoned creatures; her blind anger at blinder cruelties; the time she had found a kitten dying in a trap, and had waited to confront and shame the youth responsible. Then the exhilaration of the first time they had sabotaged a hunt, and saved a fox.

Even in those early days, there had been difficulty. His mother never accepted their effort to be totally vegetarian; she had reached an age at which change of any sort seemed a rude imposition. She felt her son should have the best on his increasingly short visits, that the fatted calf should literally be killed. The rows left him drained: neither woman being willing to let the argument flow over him, he became a field for their battle, his own uncertain opinions a no man's land.

For the first two years, the farm was not a problem. He was sure his yearning for self-sufficiency could be reconciled with her crusade, against the horrid exploitation of modern batteries, though he regretted the strength of her language, in the farming circles he needed to mix in. Deploing the crowded cages, from which their pathetic debeaked hens had been freed, he still felt terms like "Animal Auschwitz" were too strong, offended people he needed as good neighbours, and tempted fate. The Police, after all, had started to investigate liberations from factory farms and labs, which Petra knew too much about.

They spent years preparing the change to organic

methods; living on inheritances. They agreed that chemical fertilizers and herbicides were bad for the land, indeed did some of the damage attributed to acid rain, but Petra sometimes hinted that this was a minor, unworthy side issue. She would spend time away, on missions he preferred not to ask about. Next, she started to criticize, or rather forbid, practices of free-range farming he had assumed were automatic. After the loss of Emily, she announced a personal decision to adopt the full Vegan diet and way of life: no destruction or exploitation of any animal was to be allowed. He decided it was pointless to suggest more cattle or sheep: milk was the inalienable right of calves, and shearing was cruel. (Though she would gently clip the ewes in very hot weather.) He very nearly did draw the line when she vetoed taking honey from their bees: the inexpensive creatures foraged for their own food, and he had learned to estimate their needs, and the surplus which could safely be taken.

Briefly the CB interrupted; he noted the conversation, decided it was more than he had hoped to hear, filled his quart mug with the best ale, and toasted the good luck of his vigil.

Later that night, the dream came to him again. He walked through the fields, his own, yet not his. The ground was hard and dust dry, the crop sparse and set to fail. Ahead, he could see the Moss, low, amazingly wet for the dryness of the season, great pools spreading into lagoons in the reddish light. As always, it was nearly sunset; he could see the little procession, he could hear (unusually for his dreams) the strange music, gloomy drum and reedy, insubstantial pipe: fast but heavy, like the requiem of some demented revel leader. The figures marched to time, with a rhythmic, skirling step, not quite a dance. A woman led the way, more solemn than the rest, purposeful, yet with a hint of the music in the way she strode.

He sensed his own pace quicken, stepping out as the column of prancing figures drew away from him. Reaching the path they were following, he marvelled again at its straightness, sensing the Tor loom somewhere behind as he turned without looking to follow down the straight track towards the Dolmen Stones. Beside him, the ground fell away toward the Moss, a sharp transition from parched to sodden land, as though the drainage and irrigation systems had all unaccountably failed.

This time he almost reached the Stones, huger and more sinister than in life, the circle complete, weathered more by chisel than by time. Striving against the dream to reach the woman, he felt that inescapable foreboding as the sun set, and the night air cloyed around him; voices rose in a song that was almost a shout, as the darkness of the dream broke down into reality. He found himself at the desk again, empty mug and unworked papers around him, the radio crackling to one side.

He could never deal with the chill memory save by escape: as happens in dreams, the evil was somehow understood, not apparent in anything seen or heard. He rose and shuffled towards the bakery.

Three hours of hard work, a strong coffee on each, and he felt better, loading the last of the market goods



onto his dray, as the sun rose in the turquoise East. The shires, Den and Ange, greeted him excitedly as he gave them their nosebags, plaited the ribbons into their manes, led them out for the day's exercise. He reflected, as he drove through the clear air of Dawn, that these loyal workhorses, bought as a lot from the brewery with the dray, had been his best bargain, very useful at the market itself. While other traders sold from vans or stalls, customers, young girls, some housewives, crowded round to stroke and feed them, stopping to buy and share his specially delicious horsesweet pies, then other goods.

He sold all of his pies, loaves, bottles of beer, cheeses and jars of honey, by midday. Nothing needed to be reduced...it was another successful month. He had never been so nearly out of debt, and improbable projects like taking on a regular hand, perhaps even the occasional holiday, temptingly revolved in his mind. He drove over to the "Dolmen Stone", filled the almost disused trough for the horses, went in to wait for Mink.

**T**hey sat in the usual alcove, out of sight of the market regulars. She wore a skimpier T-shirt, which he doubted, but hoped, was for his benefit. She was direct:

"Did you get anything?"

"Yes. The routine perimeter patrol seems to be on the hour, till about ten past. Not much activity between patrols. Also, the alarm for the fence won't be ready till the weekend."

"You're sure? Fifty minutes should be enough to get in, put our stuff in the tanks, get out; do a little first aid on the fence. It's important no one suspects till they've had a chance to start the engines, and run the stuff right through them."

"Clog the bastards up, eh?"

"Should burn them right out. This stuff's new."

"Another thing. There's a boxing match being broadcast tonight, on Radio 4, about 2 o'clock. A really big fight, world title or something. Both men have money on the result."

"So they'll be glued to that? Lovely break. I can't afford a fine, and don't fancy time inside." She relaxed a little. "In fact, I'm getting pretty fed up with being broke all the time."

"If you're that short, I'll be in a position to take a few people on over the summer. Have to in fact, for harvest. Wages aren't special, but bed and full board are provided." He tried to stress all parts of this package equally.

"I may take you up. A few weeks straight work would seem a holiday." She stretched, a little sensuously, he fancied, and continued: "Do you work alone? I'd heard you were married."

"Mostly it's just me, a schoolboy on Saturdays, and odd students, on the terms I've explained." He paused, thought carefully, continued: "Do you know my wife Petra? Nowadays, she spends nearly all her time away, secret work for animals. You may have run into her."

She looked around, before replying: "Our group works to save whole environments. We don't think it's worth doing much for individual animals. It's a pretty impossible mission."

He relaxed. "Actually, I agree with you. I found it

wasn't on to run the farm on strictly Vegan, Animal Lib, lines. No point in keeping the livestock. One of her friends suggested turning them loose, but that I did talk her out of. They'd not have survived, and Petra literally wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Vegans are good at making you feel guilty. They don't do so many things that are wrong if you're remorselessly logical."

"I'd call it obsessional. You're trying to run an ordinary old fashioned farm, and they make you feel like a criminal." Briefly, he lost his normal rigid control. "Like a criminal!"

"I've always wondered how folk with that sort of belief would take to the ordinary rough trade of growing food."

"Badly." He was still emotional. "Even growing veggies is hard without killing. Every damn creature wants a cut. We avoid chemical pesticides...just occasionally I've been forced to use them. Keeping the fields small contains specialized pests, but you get such problems when people disrupt predator habitats. And rabbits! Petra spent so much time repairing fencework. So much of her life. Just a challenge for those burrowers. She made a crusade of it before...the end. I kept making deadlines, after which I was going to buy a gun, use the dogs. She just worked harder to prove we could do without that."

A Morris Man was going round the alcoves, distributing leaflets for the May Queen pageant. Mink picked one up.

"Sexist crap," she said, without much feeling.

"It's not a modern beauty contest. They keep pretty close to the old May Day traditions. Pagan fertility rites the Puritans wanted to ban...survivals from Celtic times."

"I see. I hope they don't keep up all the old rituals."

He was stumped for a second, then blurted: "You mean the Sacred Marriage – making love in the fields to give fertility? Not officially. I don't know what people sneak off and do."

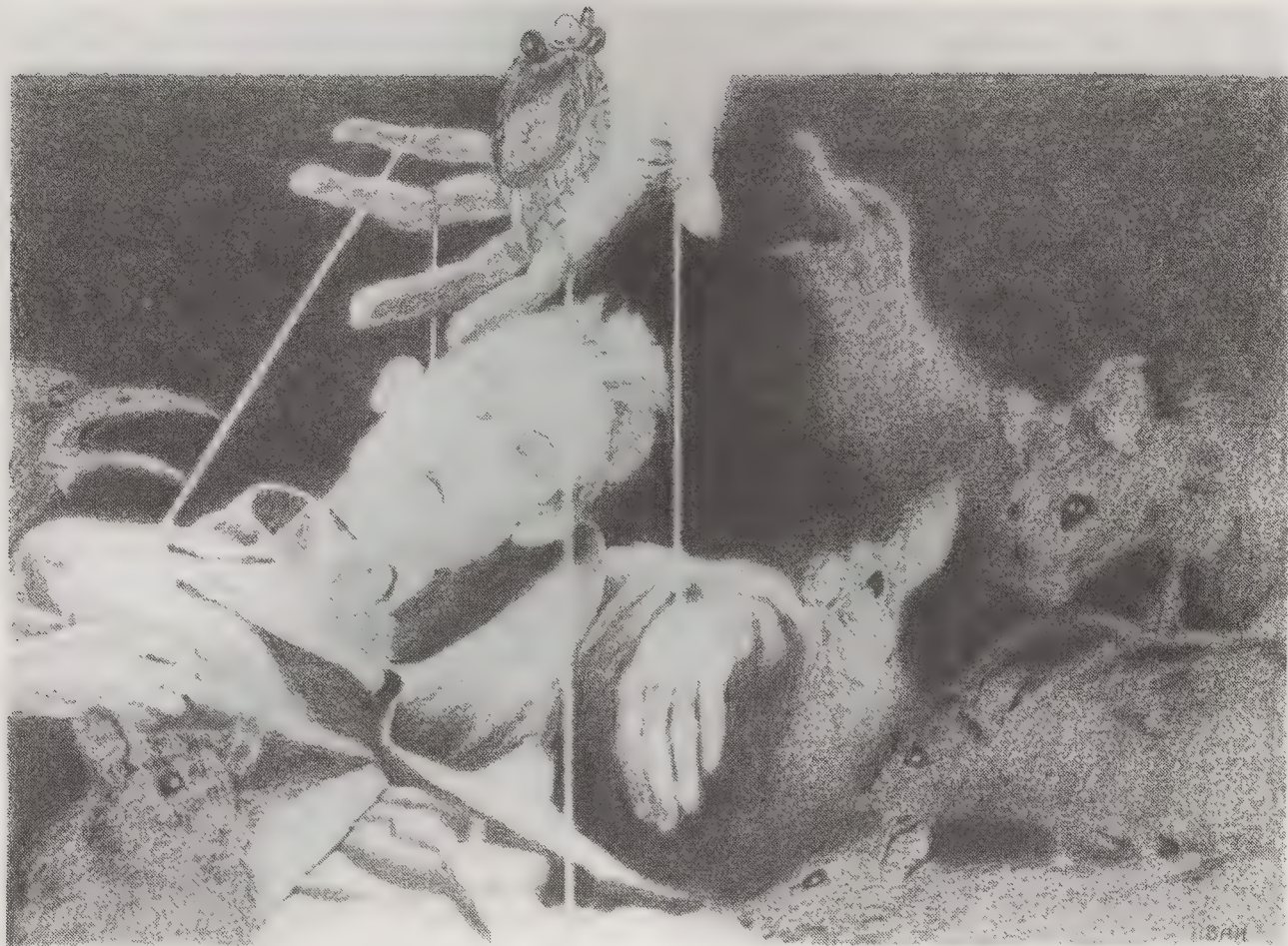
"I meant that, originally, the May Queen would have been chosen for Human Sacrifice."

"I'm sure that didn't happen every year." A strangeness flowed over him. "Only when times were very hard, to keep the crop from failing again." He shuddered, found himself saying:

"You see, the Pagans knew that Death is as much a part of life as sex, but for Celts, symbol and reality were much more intertwined than for us. That's why they put their blood as well as their seed into the land, to show they understood the cycle, accepted their part in it."

**A**s they left, he smiled at the new sign; the Dolmens lay tumbled in their modern confusion, as an Asterix Druid dragged a nearly naked girl toward them. He decided to walk off his drink; round the market square, plateglass shop fronts gleaming like vampire teeth in half-timbered houses; down the High Street, jammed up and double parked, air foul and blaring with impatience. He cut down an alley toward the oldest and quietest part of town; the closed, cobbled Marygate, with the least changed and most ancient of all buildings. Our Lady of the Low Lands was a focus of tranquillity, even before he stepped over the worn threshold. Ignoring the tourist





guides, he found a pew, sat seeking some meditation that might bring absolution. After a little he reacted to the serenity, was able to admire the stained-glass windows and mediaeval carvings. Yet these were the works of mortals; looking on the calm features of that impossible woman, the not-Goddess who transcended both love and death of the body, he did not sense the presence he sometimes knew in the fields, on the moors, or beneath the Tor.

He took a quiet road which ran between his land and the Moss, then followed the Ley line to the ruined Dolmens. There was one place wide enough to stop safely and get a look at the development. The work was more advanced than he expected, nearer to his land. He spent a long time staring, trying to estimate the line it would take, resumed driving wildly, flicking the startled horses with the reins, careering along like nothing seen since Caractacus and his chariots.

Recognizing Cranage's car near the entrance to his drive, he pulled his little Juggernaut suddenly to a halt.

"What are you doing here? Snooping, I suppose!"

"Just routine patrol. We had more trouble than we hoped, down at the demo. Had to arrest a couple of misguided youngsters, obstructing official Government work."

"That's nothing to do with me, though I'm getting even more sympathy for those demonstrators. The work is much closer to my land than we were told at the Inquiry. What's going on?"

Cranage composed himself to look official. "English Heritage are taking advantage of the main works to push a slip road up to the Dolmen ruins. They own

that edge of the marsh. New legislation: they're not required to hold an Inquiry."

"Not required... what kind of country is this! That road will pass very close to my land. It'll destroy one of the last wild places for miles! It could disrupt the whole Ecosystem." He ran out of anger, continued in fear: "There's got to be a way people can stop this kind of thing, otherwise they will start thinking of sabotage."

"Sabotage, eh?" Cranage paused thoughtfully. "It's just making it easier for people to go and see the remains. Surely you conservation types wouldn't want to sabotage that?"

Marshall felt himself lose the struggle for self control, searched for safe ground. "It's bad enough having a pointless new road to the Industrial Estate. They could have reopened the old railway. But to destroy wetland, so gawpers can see heritage! Battery people driving up to have a component screwed into their so-called education! No one who uses that road will have the faintest notion of how folk have struggled since Celtic times to live from this land! The men who built that circle of stones did it as an act of worship. They treasured the soil, they were proud to work it, in awe of forces men can't control. Now we're like hens in cages, living for drugs and the additives in our food, learning nothing with meaning. Except that a few of us just want our little corners, where we can be a bit like ourselves, live something like the life people are meant to lead. And that seems to be asking too much."

He stopped, feared he had given something away. Cranage was an unusual policeman, a graduate, the



son of an actor who had once played a country detective in a famous TV series. Now, he adopted his father's pose, head to one side, faint smile, hard intrigued eyes, making silent interrogation. Marshall blustered on: "I just want to be left alone here. I don't want to be besieged by trippers. Or by the Old Bill."

"I might need to call by, have a look round."

"Don't. If you want to look round my property, you can damn well get a search warrant."

He drove fast, shaking at his own imprudent fury. He stabled the horses, neglected to rub them down, ran into the house. It took minutes that seemed endless to find the previous night's notes, memorize and burn them. Something nagged: he roamed the farm looking for evidence; finally, he remembered to retune the CB, away from the incriminating wavelength.

**T**he dream invaded more of his senses than ever that night. He could smell the wind off the marsh, sense it chafe his face. He could almost taste the scent of innumerable herbs and tiny inhabitants of the wet land. It was earlier; clouds were rolling up from the horizon in the West wind, still touching it in parts, so the sunset sent great columns of ruby light across the landscape. The Tor was bathed in one; bright and powerful against the sky, red and ominous also. He noticed without surprise that its summit lacked the solitary guardian tower.

He followed the procession as it swayed along the line at the edge of the fields, closer now than ever, yet hard as he might strive, he could not reach them. They came to the Dolmen circle; every stone erect, round columns alternate with rhomboid shapes. He fought toward the woman: she wore a short dress, of coarse but gaily-coloured cloth, solid gold arm rings, a crown and necklace of spring flowers. In the dream-knowledge, he sensed she was Petra, even though she was shorter, looked younger, less tense and strained, and wore a belt of ermine fur. She walked, sadly, but with no compulsion, toward the Altar Stone; he struggled against that invisible, unknowable barrier, which kept them, however near, so irreversibly separate. Then, for the first and only time, she gave him a look full face; sadness and anger at fate, cemented with a determination which allowed no second thought. He found himself falling, crying out in his sleep, waking sudden and shivering from the endless corridor of time.

It was hard to work his way out. He roamed the dark farm looking for anything to occupy his mind, to purge it of nightmare. As first light crept very gently across the sky, he took a turn outside: nothing was stirring, the birds had not started to sing. On impulse, he picked up the CB, tuned it to the security network. There was nothing for a while, then:

"It was a real break, the Bill turning up like that. Coppers and scientists on the same bus. If they hadn't found that body, we'd have been caught with our kecks off."

"Missed the end of the bloody fight, but those bitches must have sneaked in just as it started. Got the result yet?"

He spun the dial wildly, tuned by instinct to the local station. It was now six, and he caught the day's first News.

"The body of a woman was discovered yesterday, by workmen clearing peat on the Dolmen Sliproad project. Police are re-opening files on all women reported missing in the locality over a period of several years.

"In an unrelated incident, two women were apprehended while trespassing on the by-pass site.

"Frank Bruno..."

He snapped off the set, spent a few minutes gathering and counting his money. He had little more than a hundred pounds in cash, and the bank account was low... not enough to get far. He fed his animals, then sealed the paper money in an envelope, with instructions to his Saturday lad to look after them for as long as possible. Then he walked out of the house. The sun was slowly rising as he strode out toward the town, saying goodbye to the farm into which he had sunk so much of himself.

**I**nevitably, his mind returned to that other spring, three years before, which had seen such a decisive turn in his fortunes. Poor summers and inadequate harvests had stretched his relationship with Petra to breaking point; there was no money left, and scarcely enough food. After the heavy work of sowing, she did not relax, but worked constantly on the fences, to protect the rabbits. She saw no one from outside, save the vegans who used the farm as a safe house. As Marshall grew gloomier over their prospects, he found her ever less flexible; insects were now objects of her concern; if he wanted to boil an ant nest, he preferred to do it out of her sight.

April was the best for years, long sunny days, heavy rain at night. The crop came on well, but so did the pests. Petra slaved away, netting plants, separating them from predators. She slept downstairs, and, after a storm, would work out in the ion-invigorated air, scooping slugs into a bucket, carrying them down to the Moss, where they would be out of harm's way.

Out of his way. He resented her nightly forays as a spiritual adultery with the pest creatures, which left her too tired for his advances. Yet as May began even warmer, she carelessly discarded most of her clothing, working in shorts, often taking her top off away from the road. She worked till her body was leaner and fitter than for years, tanned already to the corn-stalk colour of her hair, although her face was drawn. His thoughts turned more and more to sex, even as love drained: in despair at the thought of returning to the dull life of a General Science teacher, he blamed her, while fearing she would not agree to join him in that necessary conformity.

If Petra was achieving anything with the slugs, it was not enough. By the start of May, they were unseasonably many, the kitchen garden a disaster in the process of happening. He remembered the beer trap. As the last of his winter brew had been soured by the heat, this seemed a delightfully economical idea. He told Petra the creatures would merely become drunk, and easier to remove. And it was a success; the first few mornings, he rose first, removed the incriminating evidence, gloried that his vegetables seemed already to be recovering.

On Bank Holiday Sunday, he made some cash by selling flowers to motorists, and took her to the Spring Festival. She wore a light, white cotton dress she had





owned since they first met, danced with him for an hour, then started to tire. The May Queen Pageant was announced; last minute entrants were sought: "It's not just a beauty contest. We want the young lady who best exemplifies the spirit of the countryside in Spring."

"You should enter that. You've more spirit than any of the girls up there. And you look better."

A ghost of a smile flitted across her face, a faint appreciation. But she said: "That old, pre-ethical spirit of the country isn't something I exemplify. Why, I've seen some of those girls out with the Hunt. And one of the judges. Besides, I'm tired, and I've got work to get on with tomorrow. The gate of the drive is a weak point. I want to see to it at once."

"You're worn out. So what if you keep the bunnies off our land? They'll run out of food where they are, and starve."

For a moment she seemed stricken, then rallied. "That is nature's cruelty. But we don't have to be a part of it. We can choose to live morally. I do, you half do, everyone should."

She left, pre-empting further argument, knowing he would rather stay and drink. He staggered home, and could never recall if he had closed the gate. He slept heavily, despite the dream, which came more vividly than before, fuller of half-understood meaning. He rose late, boiled a saucepan of coffee, whiled time weaving an unsold bunch of daffodils into a chain.

She was in the kitchen garden, wearing only her shorts and plastic sandals. She had taken the large fork, but had stuck it in the earth. The sun played

through an apple tree, dappling intriguing patterns on her brown body, as she knelt to examine something, her bare breasts hanging straight down, making a kaleidoscope of the leaf shadows as she moved slowly round. He sneaked up quietly, managed to get the chain over her head.

"A crown for my personal, ethical, May Queen!"

She rocketed upright, such rage distorting her as he had not seen, knocked his hand aside, shouted: "You're poisoning them! You promised never to do that!"

"It's only beer. They're drunk." His mind scrambled for a way out, could only find bravado. "Anyway, what a way to go!"

"That's not drunkenness!" It was true: the nearest pot was full of the usual mess of slugs, some obviously dead, others still writhing hideously. He could barely stop himself retching, shouted in torment:

"Surely even you can't give a damn what I do to those horrible creatures!"

"All creatures have a right to life. An equal right." For a second her voice quavered, as though in doubt, then she repeated, in utter determination: "An equal right to live!"

For a second, time held them in a wordless, raging tableau, him lost in despair for his beloved farm, his organic castle against the uncaring modern world, her frozen in the furious, narrow track into which her remorseless morality had driven her. He searched for the words which would get her off his farm, out of his life, with no hope of finding them.

Then, as though unleashed by some malicious spirit of the woods, a rabbit hopped across the edge



of their vision, stopped to nibble a leaf.

"Things are going to change around here. I'm putting the dogs on that...it's about time they earned their keep!"

He turned, but somehow she managed to block him. "Over my dead body, you'll do that!"

He could never remember after, how his hands came around her throat; but struggle though he might, he dared not release her; he knew he would never be able to live with her accusing knowledge, that he was a man of violence, no better than the rest. At length, he let her body fall: was unready for remorse; seeing it still move, he blamed her utterly for his shaming, disgusting explosion: seized the fork and drove it into her. Even at the last, seeing some tiny sign of life, he did not hesitate to weight the body and hurl it into the deepest pool he knew of in the Moss.

And somehow he survived, crushing the knowledge of his evil, so that it preyed only on a part of his mind, burying the rest in work. Only his vision was left, for Petra's slept with her in the marsh. He knew now that they could never have built anything together, could only have been one in flesh. Her epitaph must be his own success.

**T**hat summer of lonely toil, and disallowed grief, was his best ever. In three short years, doing things his way, he proved himself. His name was known, as the man who reconciled ancient and modern methods; students came, and worked for knowledge, or whatever little he chose to pay. Yet there were other dreams, of that other sacrifice, that came unbidden. Now he reasoned, as he strode off his own land, on toward the town, his mortgage of crime had been foreclosed. Cranage's questions, even the unscheduled roadworks; he saw the pattern now.

He strode into the Police Station resolutely, was not surprised to see Cranage grinning slyly behind the desk.

It was pointless to delay. He took a deep breath, announced: "I've come about my wife."

"I thought that might be it." Cranage nodded with his malicious wisdom. Marshall was trying to compose the best wording for the confession, when he continued: "I suppose you think you can bail her out."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Our little saboteur. Well, we've got her bang to rights, as they say. Mink de Vole indeed! I knew she had to be the mysterious Mrs Marshall. There'll be no bail before the court...and we'll be applying for a search warrant."

"You'll find nothing at the farm," Marshall said automatically. He added: "How did you come to arrest Mink?"

"Stroke of luck, from our point of view. Did you know a body turned up in the roadworks?"

"Yes, of course. I heard about it on the news."

"Young woman. I suppose young. They think she'd suffered something called the Triple Death. Strangled, stabbed, drowned." Marshall was almost fainting, as the sergeant continued: "From her jewels and costume, the archaeologists think she was a victim of your Celtic pals. Amazing how they can tell, really, but they often find these preserved things in the peat. Anyway, it seems the Ancient Britons made a habit out of sacrificing these girls. dumping them in the marsh."

"They only did it to save the crop." Marshall's voice was distant, but very firm. "Only if it was absolutely essential to save the crops."

"That's as may be. Anyway, we've work to get on with. Get out of here, before I do you for conspiracy!"

He walked out still free, the mortgage unredeemed. Yet the brooding presence in the land, the nightmare of another sacrificial death, timeless, beyond good and evil, would weigh him down.

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**Peter T. Garratt** (born 1949) wrote the well-received story "If the Driver Vanishes..." (IZ 13) – reprinted in our second anthology, due out in paperback this month from New English Library. Since then he has published several other pieces of fiction in small magazines. A psychologist by profession, he remains keenly interested in ecology, King Arthur and liberal politics.

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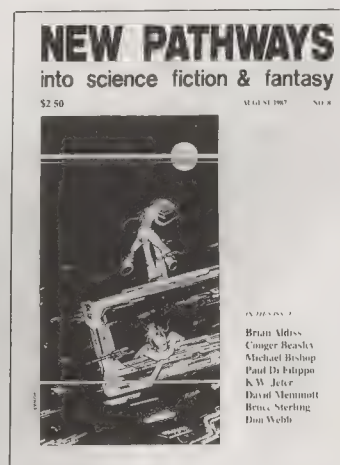
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# Mutant Popcorn

## Film Reviews by Nick Lowe

To digress for a moment, it's strange how the white boys are still scared of rhythm. With the recent curious renaissance of the voodoo movie, we've been hearing rather a lot this season of the muffled, maddening beating of vile drums and the thin monotonous whine of accursed flutes. There'd be nothing to mind if these came together in the form of a *DéDé Saint-Prix 12"* dance mix, but movieland's image of Creole country is sadly still rooted in a kind of queasy xenophobia that trips to a very different beat. There's a remarkable scene, for instance, in Schlesinger's spring dud *The Believers* where the black-as-sin Haitian villain takes time off from ritual child-murder to hog the dancefloor at a New York society fundraiser. Drums pound, eyeballs roll white, and watching matrons turn moist as this extraordinarily beautiful male goes into a sinuous boogie that would put our Gracie to shame. What makes this set-piece remarkable, and actually deeply unpleasant, is that it's presented to its audience as a terrifying manifestation of ultimate evil. The problem, of course, with voodoo pictures, and the reason why the present revival is not an encouraging trend, is that their address to the emotions is irreducibly based on crudely racial fears — even when (as, I may say, conspicuously fails to happen in *The Believers*) this theme is intellectually controverted in the film's surface text. Even the popular music of the French Caribbean, which by any standards has to be the most ebullient and danceable currently produced on this planet, finds itself distorted by film composers into a wretched travesty full of jungle drums and sinister tribal whoopings. It'll be interesting to see what's happened to Wade Davis's original book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* in Wes Craven's "inspired-by" flick version: in particular, whether anything remains of the book's careful argument that the real roots of the zombi cult lie not in the molecular chemistry of blowfish toxins but in the racial politics of post-colonial Haitian history. But given the project's genre market and credentials, I doubt we'll be jiving to the *vin*i soukoué white-hot horns of Tabou Combo on the soundtrack.

These idlings were touched off by the big production number in our late-summer blockbuster *Beetlejuice*, in which the spirits attempt to scare bejasus out of a clutch of New York sophisticates by turning their dinner party into a high-falutin' eye-rollin' mime rendition of "Day-O." In fairness to the movie, the Belafonte classics that bring a touch of distinction to the soundtrack are hardly there to be scary, but simply to add one more elaborate style gag to an already rather style-heavy film. But the calypso number

by drowning. On entry to the film's resolutely non-denominational after-life, they find themselves trapped for a statutory 125 years in their idyllic timber home in Winter River, Connecticut, where their posthumous troubles are only beginning. First, their rustic haunt is bought up by a speculator from the Apple, who moves in his gruesome sculptress wife and Gorey-esque teenage daughter. (Dad, cheerily: "When we're settled in we can build Lydia a darkroom in the basement." Lydia, morbidly, through black veils:



Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis as the recently deceased couple in 'Beetlejuice'

does showcase well the essential qualities of this profoundly eccentric movie: it's brilliantly mounted, makes no sense whatever, performs disorienting flips between horror and farce without being either terribly frightening or terribly funny, and leaves you in a state of complete bemusement that at times can be legitimately mistaken for pleasure.

For *Beetlejuice* is a light-hearted comedy about American death: in particular, about the genuinely nightmarish possibility that life after death might be just as shallow and stupid as life before. Its plot follows the wacky misadventures of the endearingly dull Mr and Mrs Maitland following their zany car crash and rib-tickling death

"My life is a dark room...") The new owners' taste in redecoration and lifestyle is so horrendous that the late occupants resolve to evict them. But, the incomers are too gross-o to respond to traditional haunting techniques; the harassed otherworldly social security system offers little help; and the Maitlands reluctantly engage the services of cowboy "bio-exorcist" Betelgeuse (insistently kooky playing by Michael Keaton) to rid their home of the lingering presence of the quick. Unfortunately, while Dad is still fixated on his mercenary vision of converting the whole town to a supernatural theme park, the Maitlands are getting on rather well with the comparatively reasonable Lydia; and too late they dis-



cover that in unleashing the repulsive Betelgeuse they've only made their existing problems worse...

No summary can quite capture the flavour of this uniquely strange picture, which surprisingly wiped floor with the US boxoffice this spring (until the advent of *Colors*, and a different kind of movie history). *Beetlejuice* comes more or less out of nowhere, careers around the place with giddy scorn for bourgeois conceptions of plot, and leaves you staring baffled at

O" sequence is a key moment, because it marks the point where you suddenly realize that everything you've been expecting to end up making sense isn't going to do anything of the kind. What you get instead, as the second half of the film unwinds, is a gradual induction into a new mode of cinema logic, culminating in a resolution of all tangled ends that seems quite natural in this film's own strange language, but defies any familiar laws of cause and sequence to explain.

most normal character in this increasingly freakshow household.) Tim Burton, who did *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, directs with that microscopic fascination for visual nuance and design that seems to be a trademark of animators turned to live-action; he's weaker on actors and narrative, but in this case it scarcely figures. A Joe Dante might have brought more tightness and edge to the humour, and the calypso number would have left scorch marks on the screen if they'd junked Belafonte and used Black Stalin's "Burn Dem" instead... But that's art, and this is Hollywood. At least it's refreshing to see a studio picture that for all its misses looks nothing like anything that's come before. That the weird script got made at all is surprising, let alone with a full-effects budget; that the end result has been hoovering cash from the punters' pockets will doubtless cause anguished scratching of bald spots in high places late into the night. I must say I feel for the mogul-men in their perplexity. Like other deadbeat relics of the semiotic age, I live in dread of the moment when the future arrives and I'm too much the old cyberhippy to understand it. For all I know, I could have just witnessed the birth of the new surrealism. I hope it's just a teratoid mutation.

Meanwhile, the year-so-far's other completely whacko movie was stayed away from in shoals, and will no doubt have skipped town months before you ever see this. So let me explain three reasons why you were wrong to miss **Prince of Darkness**. One, it has a character stabbed to death with a bicycle. No, no reason at all that I could see; nobody in the rest of the film appears even to notice. Two, it brings back all the classic John Carpenter trademarks you thought he'd grown out of long since: perfunctory acting; laughable dialogue (to be fair, it's credited to someone else); Donald Pleasence (better than ever); disposable characters trapped on a cheap set getting picked off one at a time; and the most atrociously-written romantic relationship in the entire Carpenter oeuvre. Okay, it's not always that scary, and the score is beginning to sound ominously new-agey in places, but in most respects it's a nostalgic treat for anyone with a soft place for *Assault on Precinct 13*. And third and most fetching, it has absolutely the most staggering imbroglio of sheer conceptual overdose since the great explanation scenes of the fifties. The only thing like it in recent sf is the late Dick of *Valis* and *Archer*; and in recent sf cinema, there's just nothing. Nothing.

This is a movie that starts – mind you, starts – with the discovery of a scientific basis for Catholicism. In the basement of a derelict church the Rev. D. Pleasence discovers a big glass tube



Donald Pleasence as the priest in 'Prince of Darkness'

a roll of credits and wondering whether somebody spiked your Kia-Ora with a powerful mind-altering chemical. Too loose to cohere as an effective satire on American attitudes to death, art, and exploitable cash opportunities, too marshmallow for black comedy and too mild to be conventionally surreal, it seems to have been assembled by a team of brains not quite native to this universe, like a Bizarro remake of *Randall and Hopkirk*. The experience of watching such a film is hard to convey, but the "Day-

Actually, though, the whole thing is pretty entertaining, considering that many of the jokes seem born with the dead and most of the performances are dreadful. (Two honourable exceptions, though. Geena Davis from *The Fly* is wonderfully deadpan and really very funny as the departed heroine; she certainly doesn't deserve the come-on grin and gratuitous cleavage they've saddled her with on the poster. And Winona Ryder charmingly carries the adolescent Lydia's transformation from Addams Family weirdhead to the



with the son of Satan inside, and an instruction manual on how to stop him summoning the big fella from the dark side. Poo, you say, standard issue off-the-shelf occult thriller plot; but no. For Don calls in his friend the hammy Chinese physics prof., who brings along his squad of expendable graduate students to analyze the find, translate the manual ("Wait a minute! these are differential equations!"), and get a strange dream from the future beamed into their sleeping brains ("Tachyons! of course!") while the evil one's powers awake from their slumber thanks to an unexplained side-effect of supernova 1987A. Unhappily, the one bit of Christian dogma invalidated by the manual is the bit about God existing (some dizzying twaddle over "antiparticles" here); while His putative Son was just some xt humanoid who came to grief trying to warn us about the thing in the tube. So it's up to our dwindling band of scientist heroes to prevent the advent of total evil over the entire universe...

This heady stuff is let down partly by its own ambition – there's just too much mind-boggling theology, too much quickfire pseudotechnical bluffing – and partly by its devotion to low-budget genre elements like sprays of acid, walking dead, man-eating roaches and armies of homicidal bag ladies ("He can only control compara-

tively simple organisms"). But these incongruous plotfellows come well together in an ending that manages to be crudely mechanical and spiritually apt both at once, and which is only partly undercut by the obligatory second twist. What I liked an awful lot about this picture, for all its confessed absurdities, is that it represents an all-out try to bring conceptual horror back to the largely burned-out exploitation genre. It tries, in a way few late films if any have tried, to find not just images, not just narrative blows, but ideas that will make the flesh crawl with that old Lovecraftian frisson; and to do this, what's more, on the ground mapped out by the modern supernatural shocker. That's an aim I can't but admire, however partial the results; and a long way off from the kind of flick whose most frightening concept is a black fellow wiggling his pelvis at a bunch of memsahibs.

**Terry Pratchett interview**  
continued from p.20

people are going to buy. I look out to sea and there's Iain Banks and Brin and Benford, and the big boys are all out there surfing and doing things off the high diving board and I'm paddling around in the shallows with my bucket and spade turning over all the pretty starfish and picking up pebbles

because I'm not actually capable of going out there and getting to grips with the big stuff. But I'm sitting here splashing around in the rock pools and having a great time.

It amuses me in a way. The money's good, the hours are good and you keep sitting there thinking this is all wrong, a man's going to knock on the door one day and say "look, you didn't really think you were getting away with it all this time..." I'm enjoying myself, people like me to come and talk to them, they pay my expenses and take me out to dinner. They think it's me they're talking to. I think other people develop a stiff upper lip towards it, I can't do that. I find it all vastly amusing and incredibly gratifying. I'll go anywhere and talk to anyone. It's such a tremendous amount of fun, I've been incredibly lucky with the whole business.

But the whole thing still – I won't say worries me, but it's all a very strange dream. I write what I consider lightweight stuff and there's all these people like it, and they're paying me increasingly large sums to do it. And I keep thinking, one day they're actually going to find me out. I never begin a novel without thinking, this is going to be the one where they find out that I can't actually write these things. It's extremely odd.

**K**

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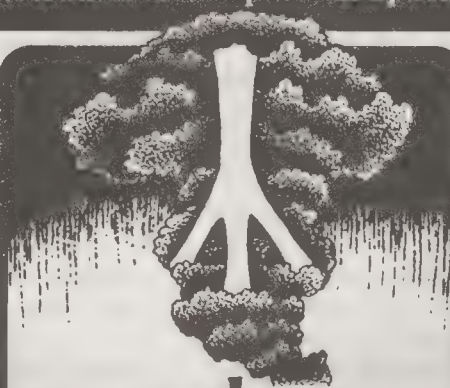


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# David Langford

## Blit

It was like being caught halfway through a flashy film-dissolve. The goggles broke up the dim street, split and reshuffled it along diagonal lines: a glowing KEBABS sign was transposed into the type-style they called Shatter. Safest to keep the goggles on, Robbo had decided. Even in the flickering electric half-light before dawn, you never knew what you might see. Just his luck if the stencil jumped from under his arm and unrolled itself before his eyes as he scrabbled for it on the pavement.

That would be a good place, behind the 34 (a shattered 34) bus stop. This was their part of town; the women flocked there each morning, twittering in their saris like bright alien canaries. A good place, by a boarded-up shop window thick with flyposted gig announcements.

Robbo scanned the street for movement, glanced at his own hand to be reassured by a blurred spaghetti of fingers. Guaranteed Army-issue goggles – the Group had friends in funny places – but they said the eye eventually adjusts. One day something clicks, and clear outlines jump at you. He flinched as the thick plastic unrolled; then the nervy moment was past, his left hand pressing the stencil against a tattered poster while in his right the spray-can hissed.

The sweetish, heady smell of car touch-up paint made it all seem oddly distant from an act of terrorism.

He found he'd been careless, easy in this false twilight and through these lenses: there were tacky patches on his fingers as he re-rolled the Parrot. A few hours on, in thick morning light, the brown women would be playing the wink game... Jesus, how long since he'd been a kid and played *that*? Must be five years. The one who'd drawn the murder card caught your eye and winked, and you had to die with lots of spasms and overacting. To survive, you needed to spot the murderer first and get in with an accusation – or at least, know where not to look.

It was cold. Time to move on, to pick another place. Goggles or no shatter-goggles, he didn't look back at the image of the Parrot. It might wink.

### SECRET \* BASILISK

Distribution UK List B[iv] only

...so called because its outline, when processed for non-hazardous viewing, is generally considered to resemble that of the bird. A processed (anamorphically elongated) partial image appears in Appendix 3 of this report, page A3-ii. THE STATED PAGE MUST NOT BE VIEWED THROUGH ANY FORM OF CYLINDRICAL LENS. PROLONGED VIEWING IS STRONGLY DISRECOMMENDED. PLEASE READ PAGE A3-i BEFORE PROCEEDING.

2-6. This first example of the Berryman Logical Image Technique (hence the usual acronym BLIT) evolved from AI work at the Cambridge IV super-computer facility, now discontinued. V. Berryman and C.M. Turner [3] hypothesized that pattern-recognition programs of sufficient complexity might be vulnerable to "Gödelian shock input" in the form of data incompatible with internal representation. Berryman went further and suggested that the existence of such a potential input was a logical necessity...

2-18. Details of the Berryman/Turner BLIT construction algorithms are not available at this classification level. Details of the eventual security breach at Cambridge IV are neither available nor fully known. Details of Cambridge IV casualty figures are, for the time being, reserved (*sub judice*).

"I RA got hold of it somehow," Mack had said. "The Provos. We do some of our shopping in the same places, jelly and like that... slipped us a copy, they did."

The cardboard tube in Robbo's hand had suddenly felt ten times as heavy. He'd expected a map, a Group plan of action; maybe a blueprint of something nasty to plant in the Sikh temple up Victoria Street. "You mean it *works*?"

"Fucking right. I tried it... a volunteer." He'd grinned. Just grinned, and winked. "Listen, this is poison stuff. Wear the goggles around it. If you fuck up and get a clear squint at even a bit of the Parrot, this is what you do. They told me. Shut yourself up with a bottle of vodka and knock the whole lot back. Decontamination, scrubs your short-term visual memory, something like that."

"Jesus. What about the Provos? If this fairy story's got teeth, why haven't they...?" Robbo had trailed off into a vague waving gesture that failed to conjure up a paper neutron bomb.

Mack's smile had widened into an assault-course of brown jagged teeth, as it did when he talked about a major Group action. "Maybe they don't fancy new ideas...but could be they're biding their time for a big one. Ever thought about hijacking a TV station? Just for an hour? Don't think things like that, it'll be bad for you."

...Dead TV screens watched him from another cracked shop window, a dump that also rented Hindi videotapes. That settled it for them. Why couldn't the buggers learn English? The Group would give them a hint: the Parrot stencil was already in position, the can sliding out of his pocket, fastest draw in the west.



At school Robbo had never won a fight, had always been beaten down to cringing tears: he'd learned good, safe, satisfying ways of hitting back. Double-A Group booby-trap work was the best of all, a regular and addictive thrill.

This had better be the last for now, or last but one. Twenty would be a good round number, but the sky seemed to be lightening behind its overlaid sodium-light stain.

If he went round Alma Street way he could hit the Marquis of Granby, where everyone said the local gays hung out. Taking over a good old pub, bent as corkscrews and not even ashamed of it, give you AIDS as soon as look at you, the bastards. Right in the middle of their glazed front door, then, glaring red and a foot high...

The light hit him like a mailed fist. The goggles parsed it into bright, hurtful bars. Robbo spun half around, trying to shield his eyes with the heavy, flapping something in his left hand. The heavy something had a big irregular hole in it; torchlight blared through, and, moving quickly closer, there was a voice. "Like to tell me what you're...?"

As the beam dipped and the voice trailed off, he saw the shivered outline of a police helmet through that of the Parrot. Behind jagged after-images a face came into view, an Asian face as he might have expected this end of town. The eyes stared blindly, the mouth worked. Robbo had read old murder mysteries where the unmarked body wore an inexplicable expression of shock and dread. A warm corpse slumped into him, its momentum carrying them both through a window which dissolved in tinkling shards.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The bomb wasn't supposed to go off until you were six miles away. Somewhere there was the broken outline of a second helmet.

#### SECRET \* BASILISK

...independently discovered by at least two late amateurs of computer graphics. The "Fractal Star" is generated by a relatively simple iterative procedure which determines whether any point in two-dimensional space (the complex field) does or does not belong to its domain. This algorithm is now classified.

3-3. The Fractal Star does not exhibit BLIT properties in its macrostructure. The overall appearance may be viewed: see Appendix 3, page A3-iii. This property allowed the Star to be widely disseminated via a popular computer magazine [8], a version of the algorithm being printed under the heading "Fun With Graphics." Unfortunately, the accompanying text suggested that users rewrite the software to "zoom in" on aspects of the domain's visually appealing fractal microstructure. In several zones of the complex field, this can produce BLIT effects when the resulting fine detail is displayed on a computer monitor of better than 600 x 300 pixels resolution.

3-4. Approximately 4% of the magazine's 115,000 readers discovered and displayed BLIT patterns latent within the Fractal Star. In most cases, other members of family units and/or emergency services inadvertently became viewers while investigating

the casualty or casualties. Total figures are difficult to ascertain, but to a first order of approximation...

"Tape the envelope all round. That's it. And write DANGER DO NOT OPEN in ruddy big letters, both sides, right?"

"So you know all about it."

"There've been bulletins. The squaddies picked up fifty in that Belfast raid. Leeds CID got another... some bastard just like this one. I tell you, this job's been a shambles for years and now it's a fucking disaster. Three constables and a sergeant gone, picking up a spotty little shit you could knock flying just by spitting at him..."

Robbo hurt in a variety of places but kept still and quiet, eyes shut, slumped on the hard bench where ungentle hands had dropped him. He'd told them every place he'd hit, but they'd kept on hurting him. It wasn't fair. He felt the draught of an opening door.

"Photo ID positive, sir. Robert Charles Bitton, nineteen, two previous for criminal damage, suspected link Albion Action Group. Nothing much else on the printout."

"I suppose it makes sense. Vicious sods: run into them yet, Jimmy? Nearest thing we've got here to the Ku Klux fucking Klan."

"This one'll be out of circulation for a good long while."

"Jimmy, you haven't been keeping up to date with this BLIT stuff, have you? It's the same as that fucking nightmare with the kids and their home computers. God knows how much longer they can keep the lid on. It's going to get us all sooner or later... Look. We are going to have four PMs with cause of death unknown, immediate cause heart failure, and have I really got to spell it out?"

"Ohhh."

"The only evidence is in that sodding envelope, a real court clearer eh? I remember when they nicked those international phone fiddlers way back when, and all we could do them for was Illegal Use Of Electricity to the value of sixty pee. They didn't have a phone-hacker law those days. We haven't got a brain-hacker law now."

"You mean we clean up after the little bastard, give him a nice room for what's left of the night, and that's it?"

"Ah." The tone of voice implied that something extra was going on: a gesture, a finger laid significantly alongside the nose, a wink. "Car Three cleans up, they've got the eye safety kit, for what that's worth. We show young Master Urban Terrorism to his palatial quarters, taking the pretty way of course. And then, Jimmy, when the new shift arrives we hold a wake for our recently departed mates. No joking. It's in the last bulletin. You'll really appreciate hearing why."

Robbo braced himself as the hands got a fresh grip on him. The outlook sounded almost promising.

#### SECRET \* BASILISK

...informational analysis adopts a somewhat purist mathematical viewpoint, whereby BLITs are considered to encode Gödelian "spoilers," implicit programs which the human equipment cannot safely run. In his final paper [3] Berryman argued that



although meta-logical safety devices permit the assimilation and safe recognition of self-referential loops ("This sentence is false"), the graphic analogues of subtler "vicious circles" might evade protective verbal analysis by striking directly through the visual cortex. This may not be consistent with the observed effects of the "Reader" BLIT discussed in section 7, unusual not merely because its incapacitation of cortical activity is temporary (albeit with some observed permanent damage in Army volunteers [18]), but also because its effects are specific to those literate in English and English-like alphabets. There may in addition be a logical inconsistency with the considerations developed in section 12.

10-18. Gott's *post facto* biochemical counter-hypothesis [24] was regarded as less drastic. This proposes that "memotoxins" might be formed in the brain by electrochemical activity associated with the storage of certain patterns of data. Although attractive, the hypothesis has yet to be...

12-4. The present situation resembles that of the "explosion" in particle physics. Not merely new species of BLIT but entire related families continue to emerge, as summarized in Appendix A2. One controversial interpretation invoked the Sheldrake theory of morphic resonance [25]: it might be simpler to conclude that multiple simultaneous emergence of the BLIT concept was inevitable at the stage of AI research which had been reached. The losses amongst leading theorists, in particular those with marked powers of mathematical visualization, constitute a major hindrance to further understanding...

The cell was white-tiled to shoulder height, glossily white-painted as it went on up and up. Its reek of disinfectant felt like steel wool up the nose, down the throat. In a vague spirit of getting the most from the amenities, Robbo patronized the white china toilet and scrubbed his hands futilely in the basin (cold water couldn't shift those red acrylic stains) before lying down to wait.

They couldn't touch him, really. They might fine him on some silly vandalism charge, and he might accidentally fall down a few more flights of stairs before reaching the magistrates' court... even now the hard bunk caught him in all sorts of puffy, bruised places. But in the long run he was OK.

They knew that.

They knew that but they hadn't seemed bothered, had they?

He had a flash, then, of them smiling, "We aren't pressing charges," and "This way, sir," and "If you could just pick up your property..." A door would open and guess what would be waiting there for him to see?

Silly. They wouldn't. But suppose.

Time passed. The terminus was easy to imagine. He'd seen it so often through the shatter lens, a long bird profile sliced at an angle and jaggedly reassembled: parrot salami. In outline against walls and windows and posters; as a solid shape in glistening red that lost its colour to orange sodium glare; in outline again as a dead man's broken eyes met his.

It seemed to hover there behind his closed eyelids.

He opened them and stared at the far-off ceiling, spattered with nameless blobs and blots by the efforts of past occupants. If you imagined joining the dots, images began to construct themselves, just as unconvincing as zodiac pictures. After a time, one image in particular threatened to achieve clear focus...

He bit through his lip, took refuge in a brief white-out of pain.

It was in him. They knew. Even with protection, he'd looked too long, from too many angles, into the abyss. He was infected. Robbo found himself battering at the heavy metal door, bloodying his hands. Useless, because just as there was no clear crime he could have committed, there was no good medical reason why unfriendly police should offer him a massive, memory-clouding dose of alcohol.

Flat on the bunk again, he ran for his life. The Parrot stalked him through the grey hours of morning, smoothing its fractal feathers, shuffling itself slowly into clarity as though at the end of a flashy film-dissolve, until at last his mind's eye had to acknowledge a shape, a shape, a wink

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David Langford (born 1953) is a one-time Aldermaston weapons physicist, author of *The Leaky Establishment* (1984) and other novels, regular sf reviewer for *White Dwarf* magazine, collaborator with Brian Stableford on such books as *The Third Millennium* (1985), erstwhile editor of the Hugo-winning news-fanzine *Ansible*, co-owner (with Christopher Priest) of the computer software company Ansible Information, and all-round great brain.

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# Two Kinds of Censorship

## Charles Platt

**G**iddy with the misguided energies of youth, I once wrote a pornographic novel that I devised to be utterly without socially redeeming value. I did it as a joke, but the Manchester police didn't share my sense of humour. They seized it and turned it over to the Director of Public Prosecutions, and for a while it looked as if legal action would be brought against me. It took a while for the truth to sink in: just because I had written some funny fantasies – mere ink on paper – I could actually be put in prison.

The book roused no reaction at all in America, because here a Constitution protects my freedom to write, read, and view just about anything I want. I can rent hardcore pornographic movies at my local video store (even if I live in conformist Suburbia USA), I can ogle magazines that depict genitalia with gynaecological authenticity, and if my libido still remains unsated, I can dial a phone-sex service, give them my credit-card number, and stimulate myself in the mode of my choice while a female voice murmurs endearments of a highly intimate nature over the long-distance lines of AT & T.

Yet there is a subtler form of censorship in America, imposed not by government but by large corporations. Is it worse than British censorship? Consider the following case history, and decide for yourself.

**S**amuel R. Delany has been writing science fiction for about twenty-five years. In a field where "bestseller" usually means a book that presses easy emotional buttons, his work has been an anomaly. His prose tends to be lyrical and complex, characterized more by exotic metaphors than cheap thrills. It's hard to imagine the reader of an Asimov novel, for example, enjoying Delany's work, or even comprehending some of it. And yet *Dhalgren* sold almost a million copies, and his subsequent novels have also done very well.

That is, until recently. The trouble started with the *Neveryon* series (all four volumes of which will appear in Britain from Grafton Books, at three-month intervals beginning in November this year).

*Tales from Neveryon* was a Delanyesque fantasy novel. Bantam published it in 1979 as a paperback original, and according to their royalty statements, it sold around 250,000 copies. He then wrote a sequel, which Bantam published as a trade paperback (large-size format, at a higher price) which sold 65,000 copies. A subsequent cheaper edition sold an additional 150,000 copies. These are figures that few science-fiction authors are lucky enough to match; they're usually exceeded only by names such as Robert Heinlein or Douglas Adams.

Both the novels featured gay relationships, presented in a discreet, low-key style. Delany then wrote a third book in the series, *Flight from Neveryon*, in which the gay content appeared more prominently. Despite the strong performance of the previous books, Bantam elected to print only 70,000 of the new one. They then went back to press and did a second edition of 15,000.

As Delany says, "You have to wonder why, in a series where the books are packaged the same way, they sold a quarter-million of volumes one and two, then suddenly decided to cut the print order of the third volume in half. It wasn't because the editor disliked the book; I gather he told a friend, 'I just finished reading the best book I've ever read in my life'."

When Delany tried to find out exactly what had transpired, he heard through other channels that before the book was published, when it was discussed at a buying conference at Barnes and Noble (owners of a chain of forty bookstores), they were ready to order 10,000 – until someone who had read an advance copy mentioned that it had gay content. At that point the order was promptly reduced to 5,000, and Barnes and Noble decided to feature it only in their eight largest East Coast stores. "Word of this gets back to the publisher," Delany comments. "The result it, understandably enough, they print fewer copies."

After the book had been published, Delany encountered a woman at a science-fiction convention who was the manager of a rural B. Dalton bookstore (B. Dalton being one of the two largest bookstore chains in America). "She

said she had been instructed by her superior that when customers asked about books by Samuel Delany, Tanith Lee, or Barbara Hambly, she should say that Dalton does not carry those authors. And of course the one thing I have in common with them is that we all deal repeatedly and very explicitly with gay themes."

**W**ell, even a total of 85,000 copies in print was a figure that he could perhaps live with. But worse was to follow. When he delivered *Return to Neveryon*, the fourth book in the series, Bantam returned it without reading it. Subsequently, they cited disappointing sales figures as their reason for not wanting to publish any more *Neveryon* novels. Nothing was mentioned about the gay content of the third volume.

He decided to submit his manuscript elsewhere and gave it to Tor Books – who initially seemed interested, then changed their minds when they consulted the two largest bookstore chains, B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, who said they would not take any copies of any Delany novel.

And yet, he can't accuse them of an anti-gay policy per se. "In urban B. Dalton stores," he notes, "they actually have a gay studies section. But because my books aren't packaged as gay and put in that section, there's anxiety of the kind: 'What if a thirteen-year-old buys this? We'll get a complaint from his parents.' After all, sword and sorcery is still basically seen as a form of children's literature, and that was the genre into which the *Neveryon* books fell. The situation is grim; it's very grim. It's not a case of destroying a writer's career, it's more a matter of taking a writer who has been selling regularly between 200,000 and 300,000 copies and demoting him to a midlist writer who sells 80,000 at the most. It's like cutting the last fifteen years off my career. It's not pleasant, and it affects things like what goes on the dinner table. But obviously it's not censorship with a capital C, either."

Well, any writer must bow to the workings of the free market. But in this case, the market isn't really free. Two enormous bookstore chains now control which kinds of books will be pub-



lished in America, perhaps even more than W.H. Smith and Menzies control the market in Britain. Ten years ago, editors were not in the habit of consulting B. Dalton and Waldenbooks before deciding whether to publish a novel. Today, however, if a writer moves in a direction that alarms the booksellers, or if it acquires the stigma of poor sales figures, his future work is placed in jeopardy.

Bantam subsequently gave all the rights to the Neveryon books back to Delany. He is free to resell them elsewhere – if he can. Meanwhile, Bantam still owns Hogg, a no-holds-barred erotic novel that they bought without realizing quite how extreme the content was, at a time when they purchased a bunch of books from Delany's backlist. They've been sitting on Hogg for more than ten years – again, because there is no obvious way to market it.

In one sense, this kind of commercial censorship is relatively benign. A distributor can interfere with your ability to sell what you write, but it can't constrain your personal freedom. When my pornographic novel was seized by the Director of Public Prosecutions, I faced the possibility not only that the book might be suppressed, but that I might be convicted of a crime and put behind bars. As it happened, the case was dropped, probably

because the British publisher had been prudent enough to print a special introduction (kindly contributed by Philip José Farmer) waffling on about the supposed literary importance of the work.

The publisher himself, however, was not so fortunate. The Manchester police ultimately got him on a different charge, for owning a couple of bookshops that sold magazines such as *Whitehouse*. No matter that the same magazines were sold by other retailers all over England; they wanted an excuse to punish him, and he ended up serving 30 days in prison.

Earlier this year, even *Interzone* felt a faint breeze of censorship when it received a letter from a local-authority Arts Association which used to assist the magazine with a small grant. Under a new British law (the so-called "Clause 28"), it is illegal for local authorities to support any enterprise that might promote homosexuality. Presumably *Interzone* was being advised to think carefully in future before publishing fiction with homosexual content.

The frustrating aspect to all of this is that we have little power to change the situation. Delany can't force the bookstore chains to display his books, any more than I could persuade the police not to seize my novel. Even writing this column about censorship seems pointless: no matter

how many readers agree with me, none of us will be able to do anything about it.

Where "Clause 28" is concerned, however, there is something you can all do: write to your local M.P. and complain about the outrageous impudence of a law that seeks to punish people merely for advocating a lifestyle. It is, after all, quite legal for British adults to be homosexual. And even if it wasn't, the government would still have no business interfering with our right to free speech on the subject.

If you're heterosexual, of course, you may feel that this doesn't really affect you. And in the narrow sense, this is true. The trouble with censorship, though, is that once it has been successfully used against something you don't care about, it tends to be used against something that does matter to you – by which time, the machinery for repression is securely in place, and repression itself has become an established precedent.

Clearly, if we value our general freedom to read, it's up to all of us to protest the very first hint of censorship, no matter how it is being applied, and no matter what it is being applied to. Only thus can we hope to remain free, in the long term, to write and read without outside interference.

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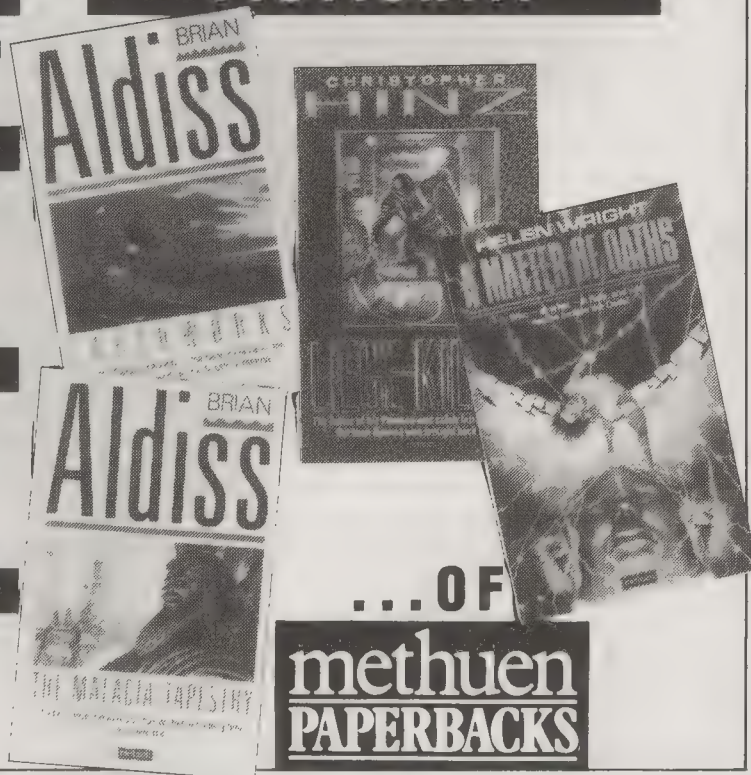
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# Nicola Griffith

## Mirrors and Burnstone

Jink brushed a fingertip over the wall before her. It was smooth and smelled strange. A cloud unwound itself from around K'than, the spring moon. Silver light pinned her to the turf.

Motionless, she breathed slow and deep. This was unexpected. Just after dawn that day she and Oriyest had studied the clouds, decided they would stay heavy over the moon and stars for the whole of the night. Darkness roiled across K'than's face once more and Jink reached with her mind to the richly textured underbelly of the clouds. She gauged their denseness and speed, judging the time it would take to sing open the warehouse doors.

It should be safe.

Waiting for the space of ten heartbeats until the night was once more thick and black, Jink ghosted along the wall until she reached the glass doors. She felt a faint humming beneath her feet. To one side, the square of press-panel gleamed. She ignored it. Word had spread through the journeywomen: to press at random in the hope of opening the doors sent a signal to Port, that centre of noise and light that had appeared on their world six seasons ago.

No. She would sing the doors open.

She composed herself, back straight and legs slightly spread. She sang softly with throat and mind, reaching in to push this, gentle that. She stopped to test her work. Almost. Four more fluting notes and the doors hissed open.

At her tread, lights clicked on automatically, making her blink. The doors slid closed. Under her bare feet, the foamplast was hard and cold. She hardly noticed. Alien sights and smells pressed at her senses. Containers, sacks and crates. Mechanisms standing free under thick coats of lubricant. She sniffed in wonder, laid a hand on a bulging sack. There was enough food here to feed herself and Oriyest for seasons...

Jink was thoughtful. What did the Outlandar intend with such stores? The building was on grazing lands accorded seasons ago to Oriyest and herself. By that token, they were due a small portion of the goods stored. But what did the Outlandar know of such things? She looked at the largest store of food she had seen in her life. They would not miss a pouchful.

She squatted to examine a sack. It was not tied but sealed in some way unknown to her. She slipped her knife from her neck sheath and hefted it. It would be a shame to spoil such fine material but there was no other way. She slid the blade down the side of the sack.

"Stop right there."

Jink froze and looked slowly over her shoulder. Mirrors. She had heard of such.

The figure in the slick, impact-resistant suit was pointing something at her. A weapon. It motioned her away from the sack.

"Move very slowly," the voice said, "lie down on your belly, hands above your head."

Jink could not tell if the voice was female or male. It came flat and filtered through the mirror-visored helmet. Nor did the suit give any indication. She did as she was told. The Mirror relaxed a little and holstered the weapon. A second Mirror stepped into view, levering up his visor. He looked down at Jink. "Hardly worth the bother, Day," he said and spat on the floor. Day, the first Mirror, shrugged and unclipped her helmet.

"You know what they said: every, repeat, every intruder on Company property to be apprehended and brought to Port. We let this one go and who knows what might happen. Some hard-nosed zeck gets wind of this and bang goes all that accumulated R & R. Or worse."

Jink listened hard, understanding most of the words but making little sense of the whole. She held herself still when Day squatted down by her head.

"Don't be scared. You'll come to no harm from us."

Jink said nothing. She sensed no violence in the Mirror but she would take no risks.

"She doesn't understand a word, Day. Just get her on her feet and I'll call a pickup."

He raised his left wrist to his mouth and spoke into the com strapped there. Jink heard the indifference, the boredom in his voice as he recited a string of numbers to Port Centre. Day leaned and casually hauled Jink to her feet.

Jink breathed slowly, stayed calm. Day's gloved fingers were still curled loosely round her elbow. The Mirror turned to her partner.

"All okay?"

"Yeah. Be ten, fifteen minutes."

"Want to wait outside?"

"No." He stamped his boots on the floor. "It's cold enough in here. We'd freeze out there."

Jink wondered at that. Cold? It was spring.

The Mirror eyed Jink in her shift.

"Skinny thing, isn't she."

"They all look the same," Day said. "Like wisps of straw."



Jink held her silence but thought privately that the Mirrors were as graceful as boulders.

She felt a faint disturbance, a wrongness beneath her feet. She tried to probe beneath the foamplaster, stiffening with effort.

Day felt her captive's muscles tense and tightened her grip.

"Don't try anything, skinny. The doors are locked good this time." She tapped the key box on her hip. "Besides, now we've reported you, we'd have to hunt you down even if you did escape. Which isn't really likely. No," she said easily, "you just keep quiet and behave and in a few days you'll be back with your family. Or whatever."

Jink was not listening. Sun and moon! Did the Mirrors not feel it? Burnstone, going unstable beneath their feet!

She spoke, her voice harsh from disuse and fear.

"Leave. Now."

Day looked at her.

"Well, it speaks. You're a sly one." She did not seem perturbed. "The pickup'll be a few minutes yet. There's no rush."

"No. We have to leave now." She did not pull free of the tight hand around her arm but turned slowly to Day, then the other Mirror. "We stand on burnstone. We must be very, very careful. Tread like flies on an eggshell."

"What's she talking about, Day?"

"Don't know. Sounds..." She looked hard at Jink's strained face. "What's burnstone?"

"Beneath the soil. A stone that burns. If you hit it too hard, or dig near it, if you let..."

She heard a noise from the other Mirror. She turned. He was lighting a cigarillo.

"No!"

But it was too late. The match strip, still alight, was already falling from his fingers. Jink moved in the blink of an eye.

While the Mirrors were still hearing her shout, she pushed away Day's grip with a strength they did not know she possessed. Even before the tiny spark hit the ground, she was running. Straight towards the glass doors.

"Hey! Stop! You'll..." Day realized that the skinny captive was crazy enough to dive right through them. She fumbled for the keybox.

Jink crossed her arms over her head and dived through the glass.

Even from where she stood, Day could see the blood. She cursed and ran towards the shattered door.

Jink knew she was hurt but she had no thought in her mind but running. She ran with all her strength. She heard the soft WHUMP of the erupting fireball before the edge of expanding air caught her and tumbled her head over heels. She rolled but the force of the explosion drove her straight into an outcrop of rock. Her thoughts went runny and red. Pain all over. She hung on to consciousness, forced herself to her feet. After the fireball, there were always a few minutes before the Burn really took hold. She stumbled back towards the remains of the warehouse.

A quick glance told her that one Mirror was dead. She stepped over shards of glass and pieces of smoking plastic to where Day lay. She was unconscious

but breathing. Jink could not see much wrong with her. Hissing against the pain, she bent and grasped the Mirror's suit at the neck seal. She hauled Day across the grass, hands aching with the effort. She dragged the unconscious Mirror behind the same rocks she had crashed into earlier. There was shelter enough only for one. Day would have to stay here and Jink would run for it.

She rolled Day as close to the rock as she could, tucking the flopping arms away. She saw the wristcom blinking green.

Jink hesitated then released the strap, held it in the palm of her hand. Despite her dizziness she took three quick breaths and looked back into her memory, forcing it to be clear. Once again, she watched the Mirror touch two buttons, then speak. She opened her eyes. Pressed the buttons.

"PORT CENTRAL." The voice was flat, tinny. Jink held the com close to her mouth, as she had seen the Mirror do.

"Burnstone," she croaked. The flames had caught at her throat.

"PORT CENTRAL," the voice repeated.

"Burnstone," Jink said, fighting spinning nausea, "your Mirrors have started a Burn!"

"WHO IS THIS. NAME AND NUMBER."

Jink just looked at it. The voice tried another tack.

"WHERE ARE YOU."

"I'm... a building. A store building."

"WHERE. COORDINATES."

"It... I know nothing of your numbers." She could feel blood dripping from between her shoulder blades. She blinked, focused her thoughts. "The storehouse lies beneath K'than's path as she travels across the sky from your Port to the horizon. The wind blows from my left as I face... as I face..."

"PLEASE GIVE DIRECTIONS."

A great wave of pain swept over her.

"The clouds above are thick and soft. One holds the shape of a woman's face. One yet to pass overhead is a tree, the trunk short and strong."

"REPEAT. PLEASE GIVE DIRECTIONS."

Jink fought the urge to shout at the stupid voice. She was giving the best directions she knew. One had only to look at the sky and follow. She tried again.

"The grass here is..."

"GET OFF THE AIR, YOU LUNATIC. WE ARE TRACING THIS CALL AND GOD HELP YOU WHEN YOU SOBER UP IN THE LOCKHOUSE. WE'RE SENDING A PICKUP TO —"

"But one is already coming," Jink said, trying to remember if she had already said that. "It must not land. Its heaviness will only make the Burn worse. You must tell it not to land."

The voice shouted something but Jink ignored it.

"It must not land," she repeated. She was feeling very ill.

The ground was hot to the touch. There was danger of an extrusion. Port would not listen. Day was as safe as possible. She had to get away.

She dropped the wristcom and started walking. Vaguely, she realized that her arms and legs were red with her own blood. She kept moving. A walk, a shambling trot, a walk again. Every step counted.

She fell. The slight jar was enough to send her drifting off into nothingness.



When she woke it was dawn. She was sick and cold but her mind was clearer. The gaping cut that ran from between her shoulders to midway down her back had stopped bleeding. Her skin felt raw. From behind the hummock of grass where she lay she could hear Mirrors shouting, the rumble and clank of heavy machinery. Company had sent people to fight the Burn.

Jink eased herself into a squatting position and watched for a while.

They were doing it all wrong. The machine was tearing at the soil, lifting huge chunks and dumping it in piles. Figures in suits and masks walked in a line, spraying foam. Jink found it difficult to understand their stupidity. Had no-one told them that the only sure way to deal with burnstone was to leave well alone? All this walking and digging aggravated the Burn.

She ran towards a black suit, grabbed the arm.

"Stop," she shouted. "You must stop."

The man turned.

The Mirror Captain looked at the small woman before him. Her hair was singed and she was crusted in dried blood. He turned his head lightly.

"Lieutenant!"

"Sir?"

"Take this native to the medic. Find out what she's doing here, how on God's earth this thing started."

"Sir." She looked at Jink. "Can you walk?"

"Yes. But there is no time."

She swayed and the lieutenant reached out, intending to steady her. Jink backed away.

"No."

The lieutenant flipped up her visor. Perhaps the native would be reassured at the sight of her face? She reached out again, but hesitated. There was so much blood. How could she tell where was safe to touch?

Jink closed her eyes, probed. She could feel the Burnpath now. One heading north, one slightly eastwards, downslope, towards Oriyest...Nearby, an extrusion of hot rock bubbled from the ground. She heard the Captain yelling for his Mirrors to smother it. She opened her eyes, caught the lieutenant's mind and pushed gently.

"Listen to me. Your...foam...it keeps the heat in. It feeds the Burn. You must not. The digging, it..." She did not know the Outland word. "It...angers the Burn, prods it to greater fierceness. You must not. Leave it."

"Lieutenant!" Captain snapped. The lieutenant spun round guiltily. "I told you to take the native to the medic."

"Sir." She hesitated. "Sir, she was speaking of the Burn...the fire, Sir. Maybe we should listen. She seemed most certain that..."

"Lieutenant. The girl has a lump on her head the size of an egg. She is concussed, suffering from shock and weak from loss of blood. Even if she were talking sense, which I very much doubt, would it be fair to keep her here in this condition?"

"I...no, sir."

"The medic, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Jink did not stay to listen further. She had tried but now there was Oriyest to think of. She ran.





The Captain bit back an oath.  
"No, Lieutenant. Let her go. We've enough to worry about here."

**M**idmorning. Jink jogged over the familiar rise.  
Where was the flock? Neither sight nor smell gave any clue. She cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Oriyest!"

The call echoed and was still. She ran on.

She came to a great outcrop of rock that towered above her like a bank of stormcloud.

"Oriyest!"

The rocks echoed back her shout, and something else. The herd bird flapped heavily overhead.

"Clan!"

The herd bird hesitated, made another overpass. The stranger below sounded like Jink but the look was different, and the smell...

Jink smothered her impatience, forced herself to sink slowly into a crouch on the grass. She knew she smelled of burnstone and blood. Clan would be nervous. She waited.

The herd bird spread his leathery wings and sculled air, landing an arm's length away. He did not fold his wings and his crest stayed erect. Jink made no move.

Slowly, cautiously, he sidled nearer. Jink watched his beak slits flaring as he sampled the air. He hopped closer. Jink spat in her palm, rubbed it against the grass to wash away blood and sulphur. She reached out an inch at a time. Clan lowered his head but did not hop away. Her fingertips touched his pectorals. He huffed. She scratched at the soft down around his keelbone. He began to croon.

"Where's the flock, Clan? Oriyest?"

He grumbled in his throat then flapped and hopped a few paces towards the rocks. Jink levered herself to her feet and followed slowly.

Oriyest had left her a message, a satchel of food and a waterskin. Jink read the message first, picking the pebbles up one by one and dropping them into her pouch. The message stones, rounded and smooth from generations of use, were one of Oriyest's treasures.

She ate cautiously, uncertain of her stomach, and thought hard. The message said that Oriyest had felt the Burn and had taken the flock to their safeplace. Jink was supposed to join her there as soon as possible. If Jink was injured, then she was to send Clan to the flock and Oriyest would come to see to her. If neither Jink nor Clan came to the flock within three days, Oriyest would journey to the store building and then to Port itself if necessary in search of her.

Message stones did not allow for subtlety of tone but Jink could well imagine Oriyest's grim face as she placed those particular pebbles. She sighed, wishing Oriyest was beside her now.

She shook nuts and dried fruit into one hand and clucked encouragingly at Clan. He sidled over on stiff legs and neatly picked up the offering. When he had finished, Jink pulled him to her. She pointed his head in the direction of the safeplace and scratched at his keelbone.

"Find Oriyest, Clan. Oriyest." She pressed her cheek onto his skull and hummed the findflock command twice, feeling the bone vibrate. She pushed him.

In an ungraceful clutter of legs and wings he hauled himself into the air. Jink watched him flap northward then lay down on her stomach. She was very tired.

It was afternoon and she could not expect Oriyest before nightfall, some time before the burnpath. She thought of the Outlandar store building, and anger at their stupidity stirred sluggishly at the back of her mind. She had heard rumours of their ignorance but to be faced with its enormity was something else. Outlandar ignorance would cost them vast areas of pastureland, destroyed in the Burn. Even if a good portion survived, the area would be unstable for seasons. Burnstone was like that. She had heard of one seam that had smouldered for generations before sighing into ash.

The Outlandar respected nothing. According to the last journeywoman teller to share a fire with herself and Oriyest, the strangers had triggered a handful of Burns already. Still they did not learn. Were they capable of learning?

**J**ink stretched, grimacing as the new scar on her back tugged awkwardly. It was healing well but strength was slow to return.

She hunkered down again. The youngling on the grass before her would not live: the flock was birthing before time. The long run from the rock to safeplace ahead of the Burn had shocked the young from their mothers' wombs before they were grown enough to live. Jink looked at it sadly. There was nothing she could do. Even as she watched, it stopped breathing.

On the way down the hill she caught the echoes of Oriyest's singsong commands to Clan as they herded the flock into the gully for the evening. They met at the bottom. Oriyest, stripped to the waist, looked at Jink.

"The little one died?"

"Yes."

Oriyest sighed.

"Flenk dropped two. Both dead. I buried them by the creek."

Jink did not know what to say. Flenk was their best producer. If she dropped badly...

"The others?"

"I don't know." They began walking back to the shaly overhang where they had been camping since their flight from the Burn. "They seem sound. If only one or two drop tomorrow then we'll be over the worst. And we will have been lucky."

Her voice was not bitter, now was not the time for such things. The flock must be seen to first. After that there would be time to think. Then they would send out the message cord.

**T**'orre Na found them five days after they sent the cord. The three women sat around their fire, dipping hard dry bread into the stewpot.

The sky was clear, bright with stars and K'than's shining three-quarters face. T'orre Na ate the last mouthful and settled back expectantly. This time, the journeywoman was here not to tell but to listen.

The fire popped. Jink added another stick.

"I worry, T'orre Na," she said.

The journeywoman looked from Jink's smooth brow to Oriyest's calm eyes.

"Not about your flock," she said.



"No. And yes. We were lucky. We lost less than the count of two hands. This time."

"Ah." T'orre Na nodded to herself. She stripped the bark from a twig and began to pick her teeth, waiting for Jink to continue.

"The Outlandar understand nothing. Much of our grazing is destroyed and will take seasons to re-grow. Do they take heed? No. Their hearts and minds are closed to us. Closed to our land, to what eases it, what angers it."

Orīyest looked at T'orre Na.

"Perhaps they have not been taught to listen to the right things."

"Is that what you wish, Orīyest? Jink?" The journeywoman tossed her stick into the fire. "You want the Outlandar to learn to hear?"

"Something must be done."

"Indeed." She paused. "It would not be easy."

"Nor impossible, T'orre Na." Jink leaned forward. "I have spoken of the two Mirrors – Day and Lieutenant – who would have listened. And Captain, too, was not unkind, just..."

"Overfilled with small things."

"Yes," Jink said, surprised. That was it exactly. His mind had been heaving with little things that meant nothing. Numbers and quotas, money, promotion, service record... She shook her head to free it from those hard, incomprehensible thoughts.

"They are all the same," T'orre Na said softly. "I have been to their Port and I have seen."

Jink and Orīyest said nothing. Not far away they heard one of the flock shifting over the rocky ground, sending pebbles scattering along the gully. There was an enquiring low from another, then silence.

"They should still be made to hear," Jink said finally. T'orre Na looked at Orīyest who looked right back. The journeywoman sighed.

"Very well. What will you ask for?"

Jink pondered. The usual penalty for triggering a Burn was double the amount of destroyed land from the wrongdoer's holdings. But the Outlandar had no land to give..."

"We will ask a hearing." Orīyest spoke for her. "As our reparation price we will demand that the Outlandar listen to us. Listen and hear. We will teach them about burnstone. We will demand to learn what it is they want from us, why they came here and put their store buildings on our grazing lands. And when we know more, we will ask more."

Orīyest looked at the journeywoman.

"Will you help us?"

T'orre Na looked from Jink stubbornness to Orīyest's steady gaze. They would do it anyway, even without her.

"I will help."

Day was startled when she saw them. Natives were a very rare sight inside Port. Two of them, making straight for where she sat at the bar. She recognized one of them as her skinny captive. As they approached, she marvelled at how such a frail-looking thing could have dragged her, in her full armour, all the way to the shelter of that rock. But she must have done. There was no other explanation.

"Greetings, Mirror."

"Hello." She lifted her helmet off the stool next to

her. "Uh, sit down."

Orīyest nodded. They sat. Day cleared her throat.

"You shouldn't be here. Technically, you're an escapee." She felt awkward.

"Will you help us?" Jink asked.

"Well, sure. But all you have to do is lose yourself. Leave Port. No-one'll think to chase you up."

Day saw that the other one seemed amused.

"You mistake us, Mirror."

Jink saw the Mirror's eyes harden. She laid a hand on her arm.

"Listen to us. If you can help, we would thank you. It costs nothing to listen, Mirror Day." Day blinked.

"Will you hear us?"

"Go ahead."

To her surprise, the other one spoke.

"I am named Orīyest. Jink and I tend our flock. Some seasons are good, some are not so good, but we expect this and we survive. This would have been a good season but for the Burn you and your companion started." Her brown eyes were intent on Day's. "When you built your store place on our land, we thought: it is not good grazing land they have chosen; perhaps the Outlandar do not know of our customs of permission and barter; we will not make complaint. This has changed."

"Now wait a minute. That land is Company land."

"No."

"Yes. God above, the whole planet is Company land!"

"No." Orīyest's voice was steady but her eyes glittered like hard glass beads. "Listen to me, Mirror Day, and hear. Seven seasons ago we petitioned the journeywomen. The land between the two hills of Yelland and K'than-rise, between the river that runs to the sea and the rocks known as Mother's Finger, was deemed to be ours to use until we no longer have need of it."

Day had never thought about natives owning things.

"Do you have any of that recorded?"

Jink furrowed her brow.

"Recorded?"

"Yes. Recorded on a disc or in a... No, I don't suppose you would. Anything written down?" She looked at their blank faces. "Here." She pulled a pad and stylus from her belt. Wrote briefly. "See?"

Jink looked at the marks on the pad thoughtfully.

"This is a message?"

"Of sorts. Do you have any... uh... messages saying the land is yours?"

"Our messages last long enough to be understood. Then..." Jink shrugged.

Day drummed her fingers on the bar. There must be some way they recorded things. She tried again.

"How would you settle a dispute?" She groped for words. "What would happen if another herder moved onto your land and claimed it?"

"They would not do that. Everyone knows the land is for our use. If they need more land, they have only to ask."

"But how would they know the land is yours?"

Orīyest looked at Day. Was the Mirror really this stupid?

"If a herder thought that through some madness I spoke an untruth, a journeywoman would be summoned. She would speak the right of it."



"But how would she know?"

Jink gestured impatiently.

"How does anyone know anything? We remember."

"But what if a journeywoman forgot?"

Jink was tired of games.

"Journeywomen do not forget." Her voice was cold. She leaned towards the Mirror and Day found herself afraid of the alien presence before her.

"There is a life between us, Mirror Day. I ask you once again: will you aid us?"

Day was afraid. She was more afraid because she did not understand what she was afraid of. She licked her lips.

"If a journeywoman will speak for you..." She hesitated but neither she nor Oriyest stirred. "If that's your law then I'll see what I can do." Day wished she had a drink. "Look, I can't do much. I'm only a Mirror. But I'll find out who can help you. I can't guarantee anything. You understand?"

"We understand." Oriyest nodded once. "I will bring the journeywoman." She slid from her stool and was gone.

"Will she be long?"

"Not very long."

"Long enough for a drink," Day muttered to herself. She raised a finger to the bartender who poured her another beer. She stared into her glass, refusing to look at Jink. The minutes passed. Now and then she raised her head to glance at her helmet on the bar. The doorway was reflected in its mirror visor. Men and women came and went, mostly Mirrors snatching an hour's relaxation between shifts.

Maybe she should just cut and run. She couldn't afford to get mixed up in a natives' rights campaign. Her promotion to Sergeant was due in about eight months. Maybe even a transfer. But if Company got wind of all this... Then she remembered the look in Jink's eyes, the way she had said: There is a life between us. Day shuddered, thinking of her own reply: I'll see what I can do. In some way she did not fully understand, Day realized that she was committed. But what to? She sipped her beer and brooded.

**W**hen Oriyest entered with the cloaked journeywoman, the change in atmosphere in the bar, though subtle, was immediate. Day deliberately took her time to swing her stool round to face the natives.

The woman standing next to Oriyest seemed unremarkable. Day had expected someone more imposing. She did not even have the kind of solemn dignity which Day, over the years and on various tours of duty, had come to associate with those of local importance.

The journeywoman slipped her hood from her head, smiled and held out her hand earth-style.

"I am named T'orre Na, a journeywoman."

Automatically, Day drew herself upright.

"Officer Day, Ma'am." She deliberately had to stop herself from saluting. She broke into a sweat. She would never have been able to live that down. Saluting a native...

T'orre Na gestured slightly at their surroundings.

"Can you speak freely here?"

"Yes." Day glanced at the time display on her wrist-com. Most of the Mirrors would be back on shift in a

few minutes and the main damage, being seen with the natives in the first place, was already done. They sat in a corner booth. Day wanted another beer but wondered if alcohol would offend the journeywoman. To hell with it.

"I'm having another beer. Anything I can get any of you?"

T'orre Na nodded.

"A beer for myself Officer Day." She turned to Jink and Oriyest. "Have you sampled Terrene beer? No? It's good." She laughed. "Not as strong as feast macha but pleasant all the same."

The beer came. All four drank, T'orre Na licking the foam from her lips with evident enjoyment. Day spoke first.

"I've already said, to Jink and Oriyest, that I can't do much to help."

"Officer Day, I believe that you can. Tell me, what is the normal complaints procedure?"

"There isn't one. Not for n... the indigenous population."

"What procedure, then, would you yourself use if you had cause for complaint?"

"Officially, all complaints from lower grades get passed to their immediate superiors but," Day leaned back in her chair and shrugged, "usually the complaints are about senior officers. Company doesn't have time for complaints."

T'orre Na pushed her glass of beer around thoughtfully.

"Not all Outlandar are Company," she said.

Day frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"The SEC representative."

"You're mad," Day said. "Look, you just don't know how things work around here."

"Explain it to us then, Mirror," Oriyest said.

"It's too complicated."

Oriyest's voice stayed even.

"You insult us, Mirror."

That brought Day up short. Insult them?

T'orre Na smiled as she watched emotions chase each other across the Mirror's face.

"Officer Day," she said softly, "you are not the first Outlandar with whom I have had speech. Nor shall you be the last. We are aware that we need more knowledge, that is why we ask for your help. Do not assume that ignorance is stupidity. And do not assume that my ignorance is total. I understand your... hierarchies. You have merely confirmed my guesses so far."

Day did not know what to think. T'orre Na let her struggle for a while.

"The information we need is simple. Jink met a lieutenant she thinks would help us. We need to find her."

"What's her name?"

"We don't know. We have her description." T'orre Na nodded at Jink.

"Tall, a handwith taller than yourself, Mirror Day. Eyes light brown with darker circles round the rim of the iris. Thin face. Pale skin with too many lines for her seasons." Jink looked at Day. "I judge her to be younger than yourself. Square chin, medium lips with a tilt in the left corner. Her hair is this colour," she pointed to the wood-effect table top, "and is not straight. It's longer than yours. She has no holes in



her ears for jewellery. You know such a one?"

Day was nodding. Lieutenant Danner. The one on accelerated promotion. By the time Day made Lieutenant, if ever, Danner would be a commander. At least.

T'orre Na watched Day carefully.

"Will this lieutenant listen?"

"Yes. Lieutenant Danner will listen to anyone."

"You do not approve."

"No. She's too young, too unprofessional."

"Too willing to listen."

Day opened her mouth then shut it again. The journeywoman's voice had said: what is wrong with listening? Just as Jink had said earlier. Day felt as though her world was being undermined. These crazy natives were confusing her, never reacting the way they should. The sooner she got rid of them, the better.

"I'll find the lieutenant."

**T**hey were all crowded into Lieutenant Danner's living mod. Jink shifted uncomfortably. The space was too small for two, let alone five. T'orre Na and lieutenant sat cross-legged on the bed, Oriyest sat on the floor and Day stood at parade rest by the doorport. Jink herself perched on the sink in the bathroom niche, the only place left. She felt like a spare limb. Day had made the introductions but it was mainly the journeywoman and the lieutenant who spoke.

"What point, then, shall I put forward to the SEC rep, T'orre Na? The necessity for concrete reparation or the implementation of an education programme regarding burnstone?"

Oriyest spoke.

"Both," she said.

Annoyingly, the lieutenant looked to T'orre Na for confirmation. T'orre Na did not oblige. The lieutenant was forced to respond to Oriyest.

"I'm not really sure that both matters should be raised at the same time."

"Why?"

"Because of the way bureaucracy works."

"Is your bureaucracy so stupid it can only think upon one thing at a time?"

Day carefully schooled her expression to blandness. The lieutenant grimaced.

"Not precisely. If, only if, the SEC rep decides to pass on your complaint, things will be made difficult if the complaint encompasses more than one area. That will mean the involvement of more than one sub-committee which will lead to delays."

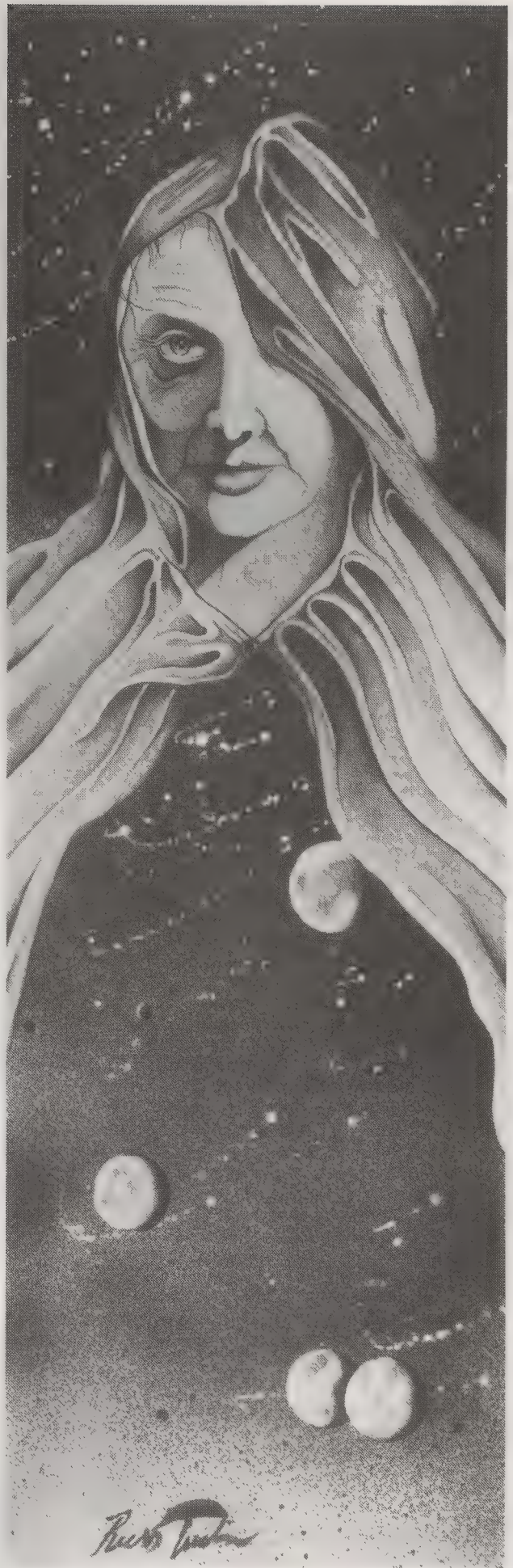
"The difficulty, then, is one of time?" Oriyest asked.

"Yes, exactly."

Oriyest smiled.

"Well then. There is no rush. Speak of both."

"I don't believe you understand the kind of time-scales involved here." She turned to face T'orre Na. "Even supposing I went out that door now, this minute, and that the SEC rep decided without pause for thought to continue with this action and even supposing his superiors on Earth agreed to back us, that would just be the beginning. Evidence would have to be assembled, shipped out – it might even mean going off-planet for these two," she nodded at Oriyest and Jink. "After that there'll be delays for feasibility reports and if, at long last, it's all agreed, then there





are advisory bodies to be formed, supervisory employees to be selected... And during all this, Company will be blocking and fighting everything. They have planetsfull of lawyers."

Neither T'orre Na nor Oriyest seemed perturbed. Jink was barely listening, the small space was pressing on her concentration. Day's expression was politely attentive but Jink had a feeling that the Mirror's thoughts were elsewhere.

"At the minimum," the lieutenant was saying, "we are talking of two years. At the maximum... who knows. Eight years? Ten years?"

When T'orre Na merely nodded, the lieutenant felt exasperation boiling up inside.

"Do you know how long a year is?"

"We are familiar with your reckoning. Are you familiar with ours? No," she waved a hand to dismiss the lieutenant's nod, "I don't speak of how many seasons there are in one of your years. I speak of deeper things. You think of us as passive creatures. We are not. We have been learning, watching. I know your customs, your attitudes, your food, your beer." She grinned at Day who was startled but grinned back. "How much do you know of us?"

"Much!" The lieutenant's cheeks were flushed. "I've read articles on your culture, your art, the structure of your society..."

"And dismissed it. Look at me, Hannah. How do you see me? As a child? A primitive you wish to study for your amusement? Look at my hand." T'orre Na held out her hand and Hannah did as she was ordered. "This hand can birth children, this hand can weave, sow crops and harvest them. This hand can make music, build a dwelling. This hand could kill you." T'orre Na spoke quietly but her words sank heavily into Hannah's mind. "Look at this hand, Outlandar. Do you truly believe that the owner of this hand would allow herself to be treated as nothing, allow herself to suffer the domination of others?"

Hannah's eyes were drawn reluctantly to T'orre Na's. The journeywoman's eyes were deep and black.

Day was staring at the journeywoman, realizing she had never seen so much strength in a person before. Her breath whistled fast and rhythmic as in a combat alert. Once, on Earth, she had seen a spire of red rock towering up over a desert. From a distance it had seemed fragile but up close its massiveness, the strength of its stone roots had been awe-inspiring.

Gradually, Day's breathing slowed and relaxed: there would be no violence. A child kicking a mountain was not violence, merely insignificance.

The lieutenant was pale but she kept her voice steady.

"What are you going to do?"

T'orre Na smiled slightly.

"What we are doing now. Seek ways to educate you. Will you help us?"

"Yes."

Jink stood up.

"I have to leave," she said. "It's too small in here. I can't breathe."

"We can speak somewhere bigger if you prefer."

"No, Oriyest. You know what I know. Speak for us both."

"Officer Day."

"Ma'am?" Day straightened at the lieutenant's tone.

"Escort Jink wherever she wishes to go. Be back here within... two hours. You will be needed to escort the Journeywoman and her companions to the perimeter of the camp."

"Understood, ma'am."

She palmed the door plate and they stepped into the port.

"I need no escort," Jink said once they were outside.

"I know. Neither of us have any choice." She hesitated. "If you wish I'll leave you, meet you here again in a couple of hours."

Jink considered it.

"But I'd rather show you something of Port. I..." She hesitated again. "I still haven't thanked you for... coming back. When the burnstone went."

Jink waited.

"Thank you," Day said. "You saved my life."

Jink just smiled and touched her on the arm. They walked in silence past the canteens and kitchen.

"What would you like to see first?"

"The place where you heal the sick. If you have one."

Day raised her eyebrows. "The hospital?" She'd expected Jink to ask to see the spaceships.

"Have I said something wrong?"

"No. You just surprised me. Again." Jink nodded. "You're so... different."

"But of course." Now it was Jink's turn to be surprised. "Come. Show me the hospital."

**C**lan snorted and butted Jink as she pulled the flatbread from the cooking stone. She tossed him a piece. He huffed in disgust; it was too hot to eat. Oriyest and T'orre Na were already spooning beans into their bread.

"When will you move?" the journeywoman asked.

"When the younglings are sturdy enough to keep up with the rest of the flock," Jink said over her shoulder. "Ten days, maybe less."

"We'll journey to Jink's clan land," Oriyest said, "they have spare grazing. After the hot season we'll hear of other land we can use?"

"Yes." T'orre Na nodded. "We will be swift."

They were silent a while, eating.

"The Burn could have been worse," Oriyest said at last. "We went to see it, yesterday. Three seasons, no more, and we can return."

"So. Good news."

"Yes." Jink stretched, watching her long evening shadow. "We took Day to see." She looked sideways at T'orre Na. "She is learning to think of larger things, that Mirror."

The journeywoman nodded approvingly.

"Learn from each other. It will be needed."

Oriyest put down her bread, plucked idly at the grass.

"She would like to help us move the flock. When the time comes. We told her yes."

T'orre Na looked thoughtfully at Jink, smiled as she saw the flush creeping up the herder's cheeks.

"Ah. So that's how it is." She laughed, touched Jink's hair. "Such friendships are good but stay mindful of your differences. Both of you."

They nodded. T'orre Na yawned.

"Now, I must sleep."

"A song before dreaming?" Jink held her pipe out



to the journeywoman. T'orre Na gestured for her to keep it.

"Play something soft. I will sing."

So Jink played, a low quiet melody and T'orre Na sang of hills, of air, of patience. Oriyest, banking the fire before they slept, joined in to harmonize.

Nicola Griffith lives in Hull, "the cultural and spiritual centre of the universe," where she teaches women's self-defence and contributes occasional articles to feminist journals. She began writing about two years ago, and says she's had stories accepted by two magazines "which promptly managed to collapse before carrying my stuff." Hence the above is her first published short story.

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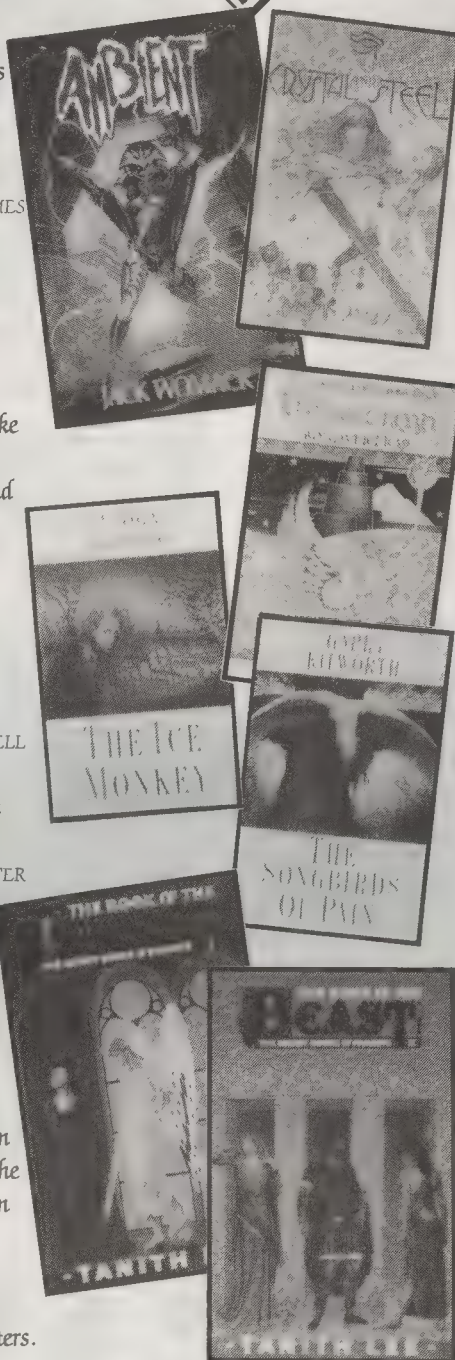
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# Trinities

## John Clute

In one hand take a science fiction trilogy. In the other, take a Church. How similar they seem. How long. How remarkable that each tells the same story. In the first volume of a trilogy, for instance, the reader (or celebrant) will witness the conquering of a new world (which is the founding of a church) on the part of a ragamuffin who cannot remember his childhood (or was born of a virgin mother). After disobeying the old geezer in who he fails to recognize his father (or Baal), the young hero crosses the river of death and returns with gifts of conceptual breakthrough (which are Sermons) from the stars, and begins to rule the transformed kingdom. In the second volume, a time beyond the time of heroes will be experienced by the dogged reader (or beadle), a time of orthodoxy, the otiose and interminable prison called history. In the course of the penal millennium of volume two it will be found that the rulers of the ecumene (or Popes) have transformed the primal dramas of the dawn (which is volume one) into ritual. Desperately they attempt to persuade the populace (and the reader) that these eucharists of sacrifice and rebirth (or bear-baiting in the satrapies) are in fact dramas to the death (or genuine sequels), that none of the climaxes in volume two are in fact perjuries against the dawn, and that the ragamuffin (now typically transfigured into a paracletal AI) smiles down from yonder on its priests and incense (which is money in the bank). In the third volume the imperium of the Church, rigid with bloat, will be seen to harbour the birth of a ragamuffin of uncertain parentage, a lithe and feline youth (or avatar) husbanded by a garrulous paraclete, and at his touch the Church will implode like a jellyfish in the sun. And it will be a new dawn. And a new trilogy (which is death warmed over).

Bob Shaw's **The Wooden Spaceships** (Gollancz, £10.95) is the second volume of a trilogy. It follows *The Ragged Astronauts* (which should probably have won all the awards for which it was nominated last year) by some twenty-four years. The great emigration by balloon from Land to Overland (two planets in binary wedlock, joined by an hourglass of atmosphere) has faded into a dim memory of the dawn. Rather like settlers in Western Canada or Australia, the emigrants to Overland have sunk into a life of songless penplain prosperity, and Shaw makes it very clear from the first that volume two of a trilogy is no place for heroes. Now in his fifties, Toller Maraquine, the headstrong quirky ragamuffin who muscled everyone into balloons and jerked them upwards into the new world of volume one, has grown fusty and grim; and his wife Gesalla has become increasingly impatient with his unsated need to lunge into novelties

of any sort. The first pages of *The Wooden Spaceships* do not promise a rose garden.

But Shaw (whose first trilogy this is) has no intention of tying himself (or his hero) into granny-knots of false climax. The business of trilogy-building may require a churchly continuity of life on Overland, and an indeterminate end to the war with Land which dominates the first half of the book, but it may be possible to give Maraquine himself something like a fitting end (and thus save *The Wooden Spaceships* from inanition). To do so, Shaw tells two separate stories, which gradually lace together like the fingers of two hands. The first story is of that war with Land, which is conducted at the pinch of the hourglass between the two planets; the technical innovations which enable the Elizabethans under Maraquine to defeat the Armada from Land are hinted at in the title, and are worked out with boyish freshness by both author and protagonist. As far as Maraquine is concerned – and he is too soon caught up in the second storyline to begin to suspect that his victory may be only temporary – the fight against Land ends in exhilaration and triumph, but ends too soon. His own life is a shambles.

At the same time, back on Overland, a young man's bride has been invaded by the space-travelling spore of a symbiont; a spaceship wafts her away to a third planet, called Farland; and she speaks to him by telepathy. Consumed with the need to travel through unknown space to Farland, the young man catches Maraquine's attention at just the point no normal volume two could sate him, and an expedition is soon mounted. After more adventures on the new planet, Maraquine has a terminal apotheosis (at a safe distance from Overland), and as the fingers of the second storyline drop him blessed into oblivion, it is possible to descry (through the mists of time) those fingers joining to a hand, an arm, the entire corpus of a volume three. A long farewell, a new start: very neat. A fine book.

In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (Gollancz, £10.95), William Gibson wraps up a trilogy he may never have intended to write, but now has. In the event it's lucky that the enormous success of *Neuromancer* called so poignantly for sequels, and that the £15 million ad-

vance from Gollancz – accompanied by the promise of pictorial wrappers for the third volume – was so hard to turn down. Though hampered by some jiggery-pokery with false climaxes, *Count Zero* clearly improves on the shape of *Neuromancer*, a novel whose plot escaped like gas from all its terminals. And although the greasepaint professionalism of the middle third of *Mona Lisa Overdrive* conceals a certain absence of forward narrative, through this dazzle of arrases a confluence of hinted-at tales does eventually dance into one cyberspace-encompassing shape, and the novel closes with a sudden perspective shift, a sense of wonder, an outward grin.

The first volumes of the trilogy were dense with data and plot and character, and in volume three Gibson faced the considerable technical challenge of presenting this material (which in the church is called dogma) without indulging in great Wagnerian gobs of rehash. The cardsharp glissandos of stagecraft through which he couches his solution are smoothly ingenious, and its intricate working-out glistens with panache. In *Mona Lisa Overdrive* the reader will encounter not one or two but four protagonists of equal weight. Each inhabits a separate thread of story. Each needs extensive briefing on the parts of volumes one and two which affect her (three of the four protagonists are female). In a forward direction, Mona, a sixteen year old whore, also learns that the cosmetic surgery she undergoes will enable her to substitute for famed actress Angie Mitchell (from *Count Zero*), who learns that 3Jane (whose essence derives from *Neuromancer*) has blackmailed Molly/Sally (from the same book) to abduct her, while at the same time, in *Dog Solitude* in the rustswamps of New Jersey, Slick Henry learns that the cyberspace jockey in a coma he's minding is in fact *Count Zero*, and that... It goes on and on. It is polished and urbane and sly, a rollercoaster of applied technique. For the celebrant the ante is vertigo, then joy at seeing the edifice (a most intricate low church) consumed.

(*Mona Lisa Overdrive* comes most to life when it concentrates upon its fourth protagonist, Kumiko Yanaka, a Japanese pre-teen whose crime-warlord father sends her to England to escape danger. In the runnels of the decaying world-city of London, she



and her biochip ghost pal Colin learn a great deal about what's happening elsewhere in the novel, and pass the information on to those who need it – they certainly don't. Surviving exposure to a metropolis caught in the infarcts of a heat-death Dickens in his old age might have dreamed, Kumiko – who is in fact almost totally extrinsic to the actual story of *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, but who adorns it – is Gibson's warmest creation to date, and may hint at his next move; which we await.)

After dextrously avoiding the job at hand in his evasive crafting of *In the Drift*, Michael Swanwick has written a second novel so much better than its predecessor, and so crammed with material, that there seems little point in thinking of both books in the same paragraph (or world). Like Kim Stanley Robinson's *The Memory of Whiteness* (1985), *Vacuum Flowers* (Simon and Schuster, £10.95) is a gravity-well tour, revving up among the asteroids and careening down to Earth in the end. But unlike *Memory* (which is Robinson's only failed novel to date), *Vacuum Flowers* makes extremely adroit use of the cyberpunk rhetoric of information overload, the deadpan medias-res data-buzz which characterizes the best work of writers like Gibson. Swanwick's protagonist – Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark – has parachuted mysteriously into one of the corporation-dominated habitats that choke the solar system, and died. Recorded immediately, she soon piggybacks a persona bum, chipping into a complex power game amongst the *gesellschaften* (a cyberpunk word for Krupp), but before she can be terminated a deuteragonist more knowledgeable than she is befriends her, and inveigles her downwards to Earth, where the secret of her "integrity" – the unwarpable fixity of her selfhood – will make everyone rich, change the world, open pathways to the stars, and return Rebel to her mother, who has engineered the whole thing.

It is a thin story, precariously told, lost in the data-buzz for chapters on end, but sufficient, because the heart of *Vacuum Flowers* lies in its title. Vacuum flowers are ostensibly real flowers that grow in space, "tough little things, almost impossible to exterminate." But clearly Swanwick intends them as metaphors of his vision of humanity, ineradicable, fecund, tribal, invasive, spunky. There may be a touch of the heinleins (r.i.p.) in this vision of folk as thaumatarges of the buzz, but also something that reads like empathy. After the fatuities of the Humanist-Cyberpunk squabble, it is a good sign.

For many readers, the title will tell the tale of a closed book: **The Sykaos Papers; Being an Account of the Voyages of the Poet Oi Paz to the**

*System of Strim in the Seventeenth Galaxy; of his Mission to the Planet Sykaos; of his First Cruel Captivity; of his Travels about its Surface; of the Manners and Customs of its Beastly People; of his second Captivity; and of his Return to Oitar.* To which are added many passages from the Poet's Journal, documents in Sykotic script, and other curious matters. Selected and edited by Q, Vice-Provost of the College of Adjusters. Transmitted by Timewarp to E.P. Thompson (Bloomsbury, £13.95). Understand that Sykaos (pronounce it) is Earth; understand that the Beastly People are humans; understand that Oi Paz is a golden androgyne from a far planet come to determine whether Earth is suitable for colonization: then open the book, or not. You are warned. E.P. Thompson has written a Swiftian satire, a fantastic voyage to dystopia, a didactic fable, a tract, a diatribe; he has not written (nor could he have intended to have written) a science fiction novel.

There are costs. By disdaining the generic tropes developed by humbler writers over the decades to establish verisimilitude within the attention span of mortals, Thompson manages to consume a huge number of pages getting his visitor to Earth, and settling Oi Paz into the proper study of mankind. And by disdaining the genuine sophistication of the SF approach to the representation of Otherness, he consumes an additional burden of pages in utterly torpid – and strangely pulpish – cartoon descriptions of the Oitorean world; it is a failure of imagination and craft that makes *The Sykaos Papers* almost unreadable for much too long. For those who give up – for whom the jejune smugness of Thompson's refusal of technique is intolerable – the loss will be great. In the centre of *The Sykaos Papers* lies a discourse of very great intensity about the beastly people, about the Mother Earth they are devouring, about nuclear war, sex, power, clothes. As Oi Paz enters the vale of tears of blood and flesh, his martian incomprehension turns into a bondage of empathy and the yahoos push the button, terminating the book in a flash and cinder. Which ends the species, and the dream.

## Real Characters Paul J. McAuley

Ursula Le Guin, in her seminal essay "Science Fiction and Mrs Brown," suggested that one of the reasons for the dearth of real, three-dimensional characters in sf is that real characters show up the props of the standard sf novel as so much cardboard. Nevertheless, Le Guin was able to name one or two exceptions to this general rule – including Thea Cadence, who appeared

in D.G. Compton's novel *Synthajoy*. Compton's latest novel (appearing after far too long a silence) adds another real, science-fictional character to Le Guin's all-too-short pantheon – and at the same time seems intent on demonstrating the truth of her thesis.

The novel is **Scudder's Game** (Kerosina Books, £12.95); the character, Scudder Laznett, an irascible old son-of-a-bitch who refuses to fit into the Utopia that the world has become. It is a curiously old-fashioned Utopia, especially in these days of Plague, having been brought about by a single gadget – a combination spermkiller and mutual orgasm enhancer which has solved the population crisis more or less overnight. Everyone has all they want, including guilt-free sex; no one needs to work unless they wish to – and much of that work has been turned into supervised computer games of financial speculation. The novel turns on just how Scudder Laznett is rebelling against this ersatz paradise – a game that is deeper than it seems – and its effect on his son, a good citizen of Utopia visiting his parents for the first time since he ran away from them seventeen years ago. Compton unfolds his tale with powerful economy, defining his other characters on the central figure of Scudder Laznett just as the locality, the nether shore of Maine, is defined by the people who inhabit it rather than particulars of landscape. What stops this from being less than totally compelling is the unconvincing Utopia: because there is something comically antique about it, Scudder's rebellion is devalued. Pace Le Guin, his presence flattens what is already perfunctorily rendered. But it is not an overwhelming fault, and should not detract from Compton's achievement: that of having written an sf novel in which interplay of characters, following logically from the sf setting, takes centre stage.

A barbaric culture struggling in a landscape emptied by catastrophe is as hoary an sf cliché as rebellion in Utopia, but in **Cloudrock** (Unwin Hyman, £11.95) Garry Kilworth has produced a spare and graceful evocation of precarious survival. The oceans have vanished; humanity survives as the tribes of Day and Night living on Cloudrock, a coral island raised high above the drained ocean floor. Each tribe denies the existence of the other, maintaining the purity of its lineage by cannibalism and incest, and by the murder of the crippled or deformed unwanted. The narrator, a neuter dwarf, is an unwanted who has survived this culling through the whim of its matriarchal mother, and continues to survive at the edge of the life of its tribe, as the Shadow of its brother, so long as no one acknowledges its presence. Observing Cloudrock through



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the narration of this outsider gives the first hundred pages of this fragile tale of the consequences of forbidden love between the Shadow's brother and a girl of the other tribe the resonance of fable and legend. But after the Shadow has to flee Cloudrock with its brother and his illicit lover, the plot drops into a familiar groove. Thereafter it's one damn thing after another: a tribe of unwanted, having improbably survived being thrown off a mountain, is found to be living in the shadow of Cloudrock, and the Shadow leads them in a brief struggle against the tribes above; and then a volcanic eruption threatens to destroy all life on Cloudrock and all the tribes must flee; and responsibility for their survival devolves upon the Shadow, who alone of all the above can navigate across the badlands to a new paradise. It's as if, two-thirds of the way through, Kilworth decided that he ought to be writing a skiffy novel after all, and deliver an upbeat redemptive ending instead of working through his tragedy of love and estrangement. And that's a pity, for the ending doesn't begin to live up to the marvellous beginning.

**C**olin Greenland's **Other Voices** (Unwin Hyman, £11.95) is another resonant evocation of place unfortunately let down by plot. The place is a city instantly familiar to anyone acquainted with the fantasy genre, with nobility in a ferment of scheming on one side of a broad river, and slums, with winding muddy alleys and mean little markets, on the other. Greenland imbues this commonplace setting with a gothic vision which owes not a little to the crumbling shadow of Gormenghast, and weaves together the strands of two very different lives within it. In the Royal Palace, Princess Nette longs to escape from the endless round of meaningless ceremony in which she has been imprisoned since the city fell to the Eschalan Empire. Meanwhile, in the slums, a young girl, Serin Guille, finds that she is able to escape her father's authority now that his collaboration with a mad Professor appears to have revealed the secret of mortality. She falls in with one of her father's experimental subjects, a living corpse turned vampire, and after witnessing the murder of an Eschalan envoy by rebellious mountain-folk, this ill-matched pair become caught up in an uprising against the city's conquerors. Greenland sketches the wintry, decaying city and its stultified inhabitants in ringing magisterial prose that's as clear as ice, but in the end the plot lets him down. Having brought his protagonists together he seems unsure what to do with them, and the novel is brought to a hurried end as *deus ex machina* rebels pop up from nowhere to save the city and return the Princess to her throne. The vampire is allowed

to vanish once his part is played out; God knows what will happen to Serin Guille. One might have wished for more of Greenland's clear vision, and less genre plot.

**G**raham Dunstan Martin's **Half a Glass of Moonshine** (Unwin Hyman, £11.95) is a very different kind of fantasy: a ghost story which, as its title suggests, is in part an amiable piece of nonsense. I use the word in its Carrollian rather than pejorative sense: that of logic turned upsidedown or insideout. Kirsty Cunliffe has just been widowed by a terrorist explosion which destroyed the plane on which her husband, Justin, an Oxford don, was returning from France. But is he dead? For Kirsty discovers that her bank account has been emptied; and what's more the teller and the bank manager agree that Justin took out the money. Although Kirsty is a researcher into psychic phenomena, she doesn't believe that her husband has returned as a ghost; either an impostor stole the money, or somehow he is still alive. Turning detective, Kirsty finds that Justin has had a string of affairs. When she confronts his mistress in France, she is told that Justin definitely boarded that fateful plane... and when she returns to Oxford it becomes apparent that her dead husband really is haunting her, and that only she can lay to rest his tormented spirit. Graham Dunstan Martin writes with a sure, light touch, baking a delightful soufflé of a novel spiced with serious points about the gap between reality and our perceptions, and the Hell we can make for our own selves. If he occasionally drags out a cliché (a don who will never quite finish his magnum opus on Shakespeare's influence on P.G. Wodehouse; a philandering, dangerously foolish head of department), he turns it to good comic effect: the same ingredients mixed by a heavier hand would have produced something altogether less appetizing.

**A**t the end of this mostly British column, a novel from the States about that most British of subjects, the weather. **Reign Of Fire** (Gollancz, £11.95), by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg with William B. Rossow, is the second part of *Lear's Daughters*, concerning an expedition from Earth marooned by the savage, unpredictable climate of the planet Fiix, which the cave-dwelling native Sawls attribute to an eternal battle between the Goddesses of Fire and Water. I found the first part (*The Wave and the Flame*, reviewed in *Interzone* 24), with its interminably detailed descriptions of the Sawls' static, feudal culture, heavy going, but I'm happy to report that things pick up as the expedition splits over whether to exploit the planet's lithium reserves or protect the Sawls, and we are drawn

towards resolution of the interlinked mysteries of the origin of the Sawls and the explanation of the anomalous climate. Once out of the caves, Kellogg and Rossow vividly depict the strange landscapes caused by the climatic swings, and the strange lifeforms that survive there. And, given room to move, the human characters become more three-dimensional – especially the coldly ruthless yet understandable villain. But in the end, running as it does to more than 700 pages, *Lear's Daughters* is too ambitious for its own good. The authors' pacing falters on the long march, burdened by detail so relentlessly piled on detail that nothing is left for the reader to imagine. Much of the resolution can be guessed about half way through (and in any event it is telegraphed long before it is delivered), while the villain's perfunctory dispatch pitches the remainder of the novel in a diminuendo key. Perhaps Kellogg and Rossow should have heeded the advice of *Lear's Fool*: *Have more than thou showest, Speak less than thou knowest*.

## In the Chinks –

**I**n the Chinks of the World Machine (Women's Press, £5.95) is an impressively comprehensive overview of the feminist sf field by Women's Press editor Sarah Lefanu. The whole Women's Press sf list and an enormous variety of other works are discussed, not always respectfully. Long essays on Tiptree, Le Guin, Charnas and Russ show Lefanu's sympathies at full stretch and illustrate the Women's Press thesis that the sf medium offers women new metaphors, new imagery, new ways of writing and new freedom to subvert and challenge social determinism.

Subversion is a tactic of the underbitch. Whole new prejudices have to be invented to keep the resentment simmering. Like the unfathomable discrimination against linguists in Suzette Haden Elgin's **Native Tongue**, and its equally implausible premise that women could have calmly and universally relinquished all their hard-won rights at the first accusation of genetic inferiority.

In Elgin's sequel, **The Judas Rose** (Women's Press, £4.50), decades pass. The women's language so optimistically promoted in *Native Tongue* is gradually, deviously and at great risk disseminated throughout the female population. Will it make any difference if women, consigned with such astonishing lack of resistance to perpetual subjugation, can at last describe their own experience in their own words? It seems unlikely. Yet another sequel is now needed to restore credi-



bility to an idea that was a novelty in the first book but has become a liability in this otherwise perceptive and polished follow-up.

In **Bulldozer Rising** by Anna Livia (Onlywomen Press, £3.95) life officially ends at forty-one. A clique of illicitly old, fat, sick, disabled, foreign and otherwise disadvantaged women survive in the small hours in the chinks of a speed-mad, male-dominated city, disguised as men, rubbish bags or rocks, and connected by complicated lesbian entanglements. The prose is as hyperactive, athletic and speedy as the metaphorical city, and the story as cheerfully irregular as the confusing array of characters, relentlessly refusing to see themselves as humiliated or oppressed as they subvert their way towards a selection of designer dooms.

Both books follow the prescriptions of *In the Chinks of the World Machine*, "fusing political concerns with the playful creativity of the imagination." I can't complain that the Lesbian Feminist Anarchist manifesto of *Bulldozer Rising* is completely swamped by superfluous creation, or that the politics in *The Judas Rose* constrain the imagination to the portrayal of endless scenes of female struggle, without falling foul of Lefanu's chastening opening attack on post-feminist critical put-downs. Both books are worthy, then, but neither is very satisfying. Livia and Elgin are expert at portraying females confronting manufactured oppression but less convincing, despite resolutely unbowed characters, at constructing an enviable alternative.

The only really enviable women in this batch are the unabashed supremacists in Esmé Dodderidge's **The New Gulliver** (Women's Press, £3.95). They have no need for subversion, comfortable in their heritage of highly-paid jobs and henpecked, harrassed, housebound hubbies. Lemuel Gulliver Jr. receives some harrowing lessons in the role-reversed republic of Capovolta as he experiences the constant injustices of life as a nubile male, a stultified househusband and eventually an abandoned father struggling to hold down an ill-paid, low-status job with inadequate childcare and indifference from the female establishment. A book to show to the little man, or to the jaded pre-post-feminist in any doubt that women really are hard done by in the real world.

(Lee Montgomerie)

## Comics

This issue's big news on the graphic novel front comes in the surprisingly slimline shape (48 pages) of **The Killing Joke** (Titan, £1.95), a prestigious



From 'The Killing Joke' by Moore and Bolland

Batman tale which started life as a much-awaited blockbuster collaboration of top British talent (phrase copyright DC hype department) but which due to editorial vagaries and the notorious slowness of the artist (Brian Bolland) has materialized some two years later as the somewhat disappointing swansong to Alan Moore's involvement with superheroes. The problem here is more one of expectations than quality; this is not the next manifestation of Batman as Dark Knight à la Miller, nor is it what-Alan-Moore-did-after-Watchmen. It's just a competent, if rather crass Batman-meets-Joker fable, enhanced rather undeservingly by Bolland's gloriously over-meticulous artwork (BB himself refers to his style as "constipated," and after the recent trend towards impressionism, his static perfection is quite a shock, though not an unpleasant one). Typically for Moore, the heart of *The Killing Joke* is a retelling of the origin of a character who has long been central to the psychopathy of the Batman mythos, his arch-foe the Joker; untypically, though, the revelations – that Batman and Joker are alike in being ordinary types who just went a bit crazy after having a "bad day" – are simultaneously trite and unconvincing (a trick combination). The story is not enhanced either by the gratuitous and graphic maiming of a long-established DC female character. The Kil-

ling Joke would have been well regarded as an ordinary annual or the like but as a production as promoted as it has been, it can only be seen as a triumph of marketing over content.

Also heavily hyped but considerably more substantial is the latest album to appear in Titan's French reprint line, Enki Bilal's **Gods in Chaos** (Titan, £6.95). Surprisingly full of plot for a European production, this is a weird blend of traditional sf motifs (superhuman aliens who take over human bodies to their own ends, a futuristic fascist city [Paris]) with the more surreal (the superhumans are actually, without explanation, the Egyptian gods, the city is infested with overbreeding cherubim), topped off with some naïve but vigorous political statements. Bilal's art presents men, gods and cherubim with equal realism and the grey/blue/brown colouring carefully evokes a drab and threatening world.

From the expensive to the ridiculous. The strange failure of review copies to materialize from the usual sources lately gives me a chance to plug an interesting monthly comic or two. One of the more unlikely recent successes has been DC's new incarnation of **The Flash**, by Mike Baron and various artists; not a guide to public exhibitionism nor a type of scouring powder but a monthly superhero title featuring a man in red longjohns who



runs too fast. Standard stuff you say, except that this title has shocked comics fans from Nantucket to New Jersey with the terrible fact that in 12 issues its hero has already shacked up with two women and probably slept with a couple more (at least one of whom definitely threw herself at him, brazen hussy). Even worse than this, our hero Wally's (and with a name like that, you wonder why he has to keep proving his manhood?) current significant other is *still married*. Shocked silence (well actually, strangled yelps) from the Moral Minority. Comics in the last few years have been happy to see menstruating werewolves, decapitated damned souls, decapitated women, nude, raped and imaginatively abused women (cf *The Killing Joke* above) but show them a man who actually seems to enjoy sex with a consenting adult partner...and then the shit hits the fan. Enough polemicizing. The Flash is worth reading for the strange stilted dialogue alone, which is often (deliberately, one hopes) very amusing. (Though not for the strange stilted artwork. Or the almost total lack of backgrounds.) Somewhat against my better judgment, this comic has charm.

Also from DC, the company that hasn't entirely lost its sense of humour (humour is increasingly unknown in a market oriented towards projected high-price reprint collections, being both risky and uncool), comes **Justice League International**, not the old semi-cosmic version in which fifteen or sixteen of DC's toughest heroes would gang up quite unfairly to beat the pulp out of the hapless villain of the month, but the new reincarnated version plotted and drawn by Keith Giffen, with some assistance from J.M. De Matteis on dialogue and Keith Maguire on finished art. *JLI* works from the premise that no more than three or four heroes can possibly work together effectively, but whereas in *Watchmen* that same realization was dealt with in terms of gritty realism, trendy angst and dubious sexuality, here it's played with a delightfully ironic touch, for laughs. The nearest comics has to a high class send-up like *The Hitch-Hikers Guide*, *JLI* is a delightful antidote to the everyday fodder of graphic cosmic doom.

(Lilian Edwards)

## Celtic Cauldron

No turkeys this time, as there's too much good stuff, mostly with a Celtic flavour. Let's start with **Merlin and Woman: The Second Merlin Conference** ed. R.J. Stewart (Cassell, no price shown). This sounds a bit like something out of Lodge's *Small World*. It does represent the kitchen-

sink view of Merlin, as a vessel into which any theory can be dumped, but is surprisingly unpretentious – and it includes some fiction, with a piece by Rachel Pollack.

Next out of the pot is **Not for All the Gold in Ireland** by John James (Bantam, £2.95). A reissue, but it's the first time I have seen it. Very readable myth-revision, set in second-century Britain and Ireland; realistic, but awash with characters later to enter legend. It's not as good, though, as the same author's amazing *Men Went to Catraeth*.

Worth a read is Poul and Karen Anderson's **Roma Mater** (Grafton, £3.95). This is Part 1 of *The King of Ys*. It starts with a good historical background to the period when Rome was fading into the Dark, but I confess that my heart sank when the hero became King of an improbable, Utopian, Carthaginian colony in Brittany, by killing the previous incumbent, thus inheriting the latter's nine wives. Apparently, this is based on Breton legend, and the Andersons handle their material well, building eventually to a moving climax, skilfully deploying a rare original mythology.

Now some hardish sf. **Shards of Honor** by Lois McMaster Bujold (Headline, £2.99) starts that way, then wobbles rather unsteadily into space opera, which won't matter to anyone who has read Hamilton's *The Star of Life*. (No, it's not *that* good.) There is a certain ambivalence to the militarism: author and heroine come over as wiser versions of the lady cadet, struggling gamely over the obstacle course in *An Officer and a Gentleman*; while the hero is an idealized good German, in a rising tide of bureaucratic nastiness: a space-going Stauffenberg or Langsdorff. Bujold does attack the horrors of an unnecessary war, at times seeming to pull punches, but the end redeems any earlier slackness. Recommended.

**Sentenced to Prism** by Alan Dean Foster (NEL, £2.50) is in the same general category: competent hard sf which gets better till about half-way through, and evokes a genuinely alien ambience in its landscape. From then on, as tends to happen in this sort of thing, the various problems heaped up to that point start to sort themselves out rather too easily. The first chapter has nothing to do with what happens later.

A series which is starting to grow on me is Harry Turtledove's *Videssos Cycle*. The second volume, **An Emperor for the Legion** (Legend, £2.99) is a distinct improvement on the first: the plot owes less to the history of Byzantium (where it's not supposed to be set). The characters are rounding out, and parts are quite moving, though the blurb of this edition gives too much away. Worth a go.

(Peter T. Garratt)

## Fantasy, etc

Reading another book by David Eddings is rather like tuning in to "The Archers." Here is a familiar world with bickering, affectionate friends; only the particular crisis changes. In **King of the Murgos** (Bantam, £11.95) Garion and his companions are hunting for his kidnapped son. They meet an old friend in Ulgoland, old adversaries in Nyissa, and find unexpected help in Cthol Murgos. It is a flaw in Eddings' books that so many of the characters get drawn into the same cosy, tolerant relationship with each other. Really bad characters are nearly always off stage (or quickly routed) and only the inner circle are shown in anything like three dimensions. Perhaps Eddings enjoys their company too much! It is certainly an enjoyment which he communicates to this reader, but after seven books I would have liked to have seen more development.

There is certainly nothing cosy about **The Awakeners** by Sheri S. Tepper (Bantam, £12.95). Here is a world where life is lived under strange constraints (such as not being allowed to move east) along the shores of a wide river. The river is infested with a blight which turns everything it touches to wood. There is an uneasy coexistence with a race of winged beings and after death there is a zombie-life of inefficient labour. A bizarre world, portrayed with few explanations, in which human aspirations and struggles for freedom and power come across with a convincing reality.

Zombies again in **Valley of Lights** by Stephen Gallagher (NEL, £1.95). This is a police thriller rather than the "novel of ultimate horror" which its jacket proclaims. However it develops into a fascinating personality conflict between the police sergeant (a dull man in his own eyes) and the "creature" itself, who is as much a subject for compassion as fear, vulnerable as well as violent.

The world of **Arabesques**, edited by Susan Schwartz (Avon, \$3.50), is familiar to all who have read the *Arabian Nights*. It is a collection of excellent short stories by some outstanding fantasy writers. The whole is given a unity, not just by the common theme, but also by Schwartz's story "Peter of Wraybury," about a crusader knight who finds himself penniless in the Persian city of Kashgar and who hears all these stories told during Ramadan. As evocations of the culture some of the tales are more convincing than others (I did have problems in accepting Nancy Springer's very modern young women) but they are all imaginative and well written.

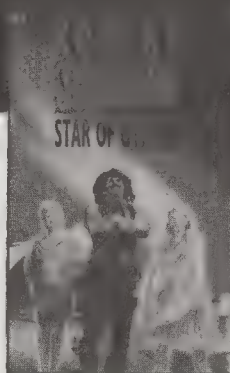
I must admit to disappointment with Barbara Hambly's *The Silicon Mage*



# GET INTO ORBIT

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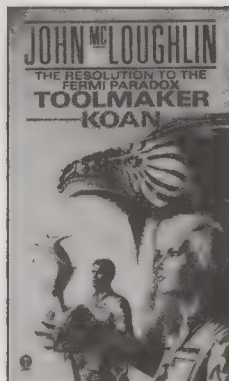
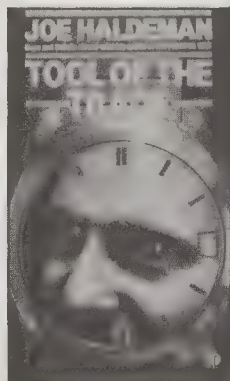


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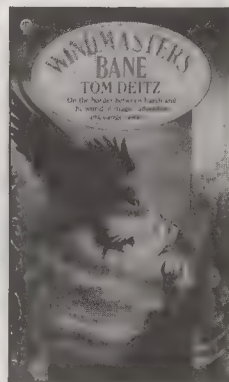


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Orbit

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(Unwin, £2.95). In its own terms it is very good, but not as a sequel to *The Silent Tower*. Joanna's first visit to this dark world was full of strange customs, unexplained traditions and encounters with strangers who could turn out to be friends or enemies. The final chapters of *Silent Tower* were full of surprises and tension. Now there are few surprises left. The only question is whether or not she can prevent the "dark mage" from achieving immortality and absolute power inside a computer. It is a shame that Hambly did not investigate this world more fully.

I would also have liked to learn more about the world of **Horsewoman in Godsland** by Claudia J. Edwards (Headline, £2.99). Although the style is clumsy the storyline is original and the sketchy characters could well have been developed further. **Crystal and Steel** by Lyndan Darby (Unwin, £3.50) lacks both characters and a convincing world. It appears to be set in some kind of "faery" country but the picture is not clear. The characters move like cardboard cutouts, occasionally pretending to an emotional depth which is neither developed nor justified. Moreover the use of two prologues, neither of which seems to relate to the main story, is an extra confusion.

If you are looking for something to introduce young people to modern fantasy I can certainly recommend Diana Wynne Jones as an outstanding practitioner. **Howl's Moving Castle** (Methuen, £1.95) is aimed at the "Teen" market. The land is Ingary and the heroine is Sophie, who has the misfortune to be the "eldest of three," and therefore of course "bound to fail." Sophie's opponents are the Wizard Howl, who collects young girl's hearts, and the Witch of the Waste, who puts an enchantment on her. The story is told with a delightful irony which is, I suspect, wasted on children. Also by Diana Wynne Jones is **A Tale of Time City** (Methuen, £8.95), an unusual variant of the usual time travel story. Time City is located outside time and from there observers can travel into time itself (both the "fixed" and the "unstable eras" – guess which our century belongs to!). However Time City is becoming unstable and a twelve-year-old girl from 1938 appears to be the cause.

(Phyllis McDonald)

## Cyberpunkland

A great deal of the sf I see these days is set in Cyberpunkland – a next generation of rampant capitalism, autonomous businesses, genetic engineering, violent crime and information overload. Is this another appearance of "hard" sf's obsession with slavery (in the sense of treating people as things,

commodities to be traded) or is it just the difference between Wisconsin and New York extrapolated? **Ambient** by Jack Womack (Unwin Hyman, £10.95) is a decent enough journal of travels in this New World, but I can't say that he does it much better than anybody else – the book gets moving along the runway but doesn't quite fly. **Mercedes Nights** by Michael Weaver (NEL, £2.50) is set in the same country. A star comedian is kidnapped, cloned and sold as a sort of living doll. The crime turns out to be the front-shop operation for some political plotting, and the whole thing is confused by a parallel strand about travel to the stars by what seem to be mystical means. Not wonderful, it somehow manages to raise and avoid issues.

**The Hidden World** by Stuart Gordon (Macdonald, £12.95) is an easier, if not better, sequel to *Archon*. A lot of the loose ends of the previous book get their "scientific" explanations here, and everything becomes clearer. There are still the parallel stories – in contemporary Britain, 13th century Provence, and immediate pre-history, after the Flood, before the foundation of Sumer. In the ancient strand the mysterious Powers and pagan gods are revealed as the aliens we always half expected – but some ambiguity still remains as to their motives and plans; I found this setting more interesting than the Mediaeval one, but that might just be my irritation with the presentation of the Cathars as all good and the Christians as utterly bad. I enjoy this series: the continuing and deliberate mixture of the commercial genres – sf, horror, historical novel, fantasy – is refreshing.

**Alqua Dreams** by Rachel Pollack (Watts, \$16.95) is another book which finds a "scientific" explanation for what seems to be purely mysterious. The Lukai are obsessed with death, living in an intelligent ruined city they neither understand nor built. A human representative, cross between a salesman and an anthropological field-worker, needs to strike a deal with them before his company can exploit a mineral found in their territory. Readable and intelligent, the book explores feelings about rationalism and death, matriarchy and individualism, tradition and progress, sex and privacy. I found the later parts less accessible; the story nearly breaks down in the immense unlikelihood of its resolution.

**The Krugg Syndrome** by Angus McAllister (Grafton, £2.50) is inappropriately presented as sf, complete with embarrassing cover. The sf idea (that a rather shy boy has been taken over by telepathic aliens intent on the conquest of Earth) is got over with in the first few pages, and we are left with a mild tale of a Presbyterian country boy getting his first job in Glasgow.

Occasionally genuinely funny, a sort of *Diary of Arthur Montrose* aged 18½.

**Emprise** by Michael P. Kube-McDowell (Legend, £3.50) is "Book One of the Trigon Disunity." In near future America, broken by war and poverty, squalid tribes persecute the scientists who have detected messages from an alien spacecraft approaching the solar system. Some industrial civilization survives in totalitarian Britain and India; the arriving aliens become the excuse to form a world government to rebuild a spacefaring society. The style is patchy and the characterization, especially of the comic-opera politicians, slight.

For old-fashioned sf try Raymond Harris's **The Broken Worlds** (Headline, £2.95): real space opera, many worlds, a quest, great wars, kings, castles, alien species. I enjoyed it. Finally, two books I found almost without interest, other than a temptation to quote the lame prose whilst drunk. In **Anti-Grav Unlimited** by Duncan Long (Avon, \$2.95) a scientist invents a sort of Cavorite and converts a truck to fly to the moon. The trip itself is dismissed in less than 300 words beginning "We did little during our flight" and almost void of description. Forget this book and reread Wells. Even worse is **One House, Book 1: Taurus** by W.H.T. Eccles (Mercury, £5.95) which seems to have the style of Level 10 of the Ginn reading scheme. Come reader come. See the alien. Let us go to Mars. Let us hope that there will not be a book for each sign of the zodiac.

(Ken Brown)

## Brute Force

**Fiasco** by Stanislaw Lem, translated by Michael Kandel (Deutsch, £11.95), is a story of failed human-alien interaction. The first fifth (which would stand up very well by itself) deals with an accident on the surface of Titan. The survivor, deep-frozen, is revived centuries later to take part in a pioneering interstellar voyage of contact. But the expedition finds nothing comprehensible, and in the end can only resort to ever greater violence in a vain attempt to elicit some sort of recognizable "human" response. The novel ends with this violence reaching genocidal, insane levels. The hard-sf side is superbly done, but the theme of the story is not the technology but the futility of its use and the failure of its owners to make the sort of imaginative leaps that could bring real understanding. Lem may be saying, once more, that the universe is stranger than we can imagine; but I think he is also warning against an over-reliance on machines, computers and brute force.

**Hitler Victorious** ed. Gregory Benford and Martin H. Greenberg (Grafton,



# Spellbinding fiction



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Meet Stephen Lawhead this August, at the following bookshops:

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25th, Glasgow/Sherratt & Hughes; 27th, Newcastle and Gateshead/  
Sherratt & Hughes; 28th - Greenbelt Festival

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£3.95): as Norman Spinrad points out in his excellent introduction, the Nazi dream of man-as-superman had deep roots in literature and philosophy – and has strong parallels in sf. These stories are all based on the idea of an Axis victory in WW II. Some of them are depictions of hell on earth, while others are more morally ambiguous, imagining a postwar society progressively more humanized by victory or peace. All are at least interesting, and together they make a rather miscellaneous but generally good anthology.

What can the reviewer say of **Sourcery** by Terry Pratchett (Gollancz, £10.95)? Another "Discworld" novel, very much like the last one, with the ingredients shaken up and cooked in a slightly different way. I particularly liked the fearsome coffee of the desert nomads that makes you knurd (the opposite of drunk) if you overdo it. **The Science Fiction and Fantasy World of Tim White** (Paper Tiger, £7.95) is a reprint of a 1981 collection of sf pictures by this popular artist. Never less than competent, and occasionally very good: 90% of the paintings will be familiar from sf paperback covers.

(Andy Robertson)

## Also Received

Recommended:

**Best SF Stories of Brian W. Aldiss** (Gollancz, £11.95). Brilliant gathering of 22 tales, some of them previously uncollected. They range from "Outside" (1955) to "The Difficulties Involved in Photographing Nix Olympica" (1986). To be followed by **Best Fantasy Stories of Brian W. Aldiss** next year.

**Consider Phlebas** by Iain M. Banks (Futura, £4.95). Handsome pb edition of Banks's first sf novel – reviewed by John Clute in IZ 20.

**The Movement of Mountains** by Michael Blumlein (Simon & Schuster, £11.95). Highly praised first novel by an *Interzone* writer. With its interplanetary setting, it's slightly more conventional than one might have expected – but Blumlein's bizarre medical imagination illuminates many scenes.

**Xorander** by Christine Brooks-Rose (Avon, \$2.95). First US pb of this witty sf novel by a British writer – reviewed by John Clute in IZ 17.

**The Intrepid Enchanter** by L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt (Sphere, £4.50). Repackaging (with an Ian Miller Cover) of all the "Magical Misadventures of Harold Shea" – from *The Incomplete Enchanter* (1941) to *Wall of Serpents* (1960). Still good fun.

**Camp Concentration** by Thomas M. Disch (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95). Welcome American reissue of a classic story about intelligence maximization.

**A Feast Unknown** by Philip José Farmer (Grafton, £2.95). Lord Grandrith (i.e. Greystoke) meets Doc Caliban (i.e. Savage). Filthy stuff, and definitely not for the squeamish, but probably Farmer's most energetic novel. First published in 1969, and long unavailable in Britain.

**Burning Chrome** by William Gibson (Grafton, £2.95). Classic short fiction by a fashionable author. His early story "The Gernsback Continuum" is nigh perfect in its wit and intelligence. Also contains "The Winter Market" (from IZ).

**Tales from the Nightside** by Charles L. Grant (Futura, £2.95). Good dark fantasies by a leading American writer, with an introduction by Stephen King.

**The Ice Monkey** by M. John Harrison (Unwin, £2.95). First pb appearance of this intense, stylish and gloomy collection. Contains "The New Rays," from the first ever issue of IZ.

**The Songbirds of Pain** by Garry Kilworth (Unwin, £2.95). Another good short-story collection from a British author. Contains "The Dissemblers" from IZ, and has a nice Jim Burns cover.

**Dad's Nuke** by Marc Laidlaw (Grafton, £2.95). Fun satirical sf by a talented new American writer.

**The Dark Side of the Sun and Strata** by Terry Pratchett (Corgi, £2.50 each). Reissues of the author's early sf novels. *Strata* is just as funny as Pratchett's later fantasy spoofs.

**Memoirs of an Invisible Man** by H.F. Saint (Penguin, £3.95). A Securities Analyst suddenly becomes invisible. Enjoyable latter-day Thorne Smith stuff.

**Who Goes Here?** by Bob Shaw (VGSF, £2.95). Very amusing space adventures of a hero called "Warren Peace." Ought to be as popular as Pratchett.

**Norstrilia** by Cordwainer Smith (Gollancz, £10.95 hc; £2.95 pb). First ever British edition of the full text of this delightfully eccentric sf novel.

**Venus Plus X** by Theodore Sturgeon (Carroll & Graf, \$3.95). Classic gender speculation from 1960 – reissued with rather a yucky cover.

Others:

**The Best Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov** (Grafton, £3.50). 320-page collection of 28 stories. There are some overlaps, but it differs considerably from the earlier volume *The Best of Isaac Asimov* (Sphere, 1973).

**Mythic Beasts** edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh (Robinson, £3.50). Attractive anthology of stories about legendary creatures ranging from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" to Tanith Lee's "The Gorgon."

**Lythande** by Marion Zimmer Bradley (Sphere, £2.99). Pleasant, undemanding sword-and-sorcery stories from the *Thieves World* anthologies, with an

additional tale by Vonda N. McIntyre.

**The Shockwave Rider** by John Brunner (Methuen, £3.50). Rebellion in a heavily computerized near future. Not Brunner's most readable novel, but certainly one of his most ambitious.

**The Deep Range** by Arthur C. Clarke (VGSF, £2.95). Undersea sf adventure from 1957. No. 23 in the Classic Series.

**The Bird of Time** by George Alec Effinger (NEL, £2.50). Humorous time-travel yarn by a notably sly writer.

**Archon** by Stuart Gordon (Futura, £3.50). "The First Book of the Watchers." Hardcover was reviewed by Ken Brown in IZ 23.

**The Empire of Time** by Crawford Kilian (Legend, £2.50). Time-travel hijinks.

**The Lurker at the Threshold** by H.P. Lovecraft (Carroll & Graf, \$3.50). Reissue of a 1945 Cthulhu novel which is really by August Derleth.

**Legacy of Heorot** by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle and Steve Barnes (Sphere, £3.50). Absurd Aliens-type stuff from the "blockbuster squad" – reviewed (controversially) by John Clute in IZ 21.

**The Space Machine** by Christopher Priest (VGSF, £3.50). Reissue, as "VGSF Classic Number 22", of a rather overblown Wells pastiche.

**The Nimrod Hunt** by Charles Sheffield (Headline, £3.50). Wooden characters in an interesting sf plot about artificial intelligence and the meaning of life.

**The Time Hoppers** by Robert Silverberg (VGSF, £2.95). More minor Silverberg, from the days when he was just getting his second wind as sf's most prolific author (1967).

**The MisenCHANTed Sword** by Lawrence Watt-Evans (Grafton, £2.95). First British edition of a 1985 "fantasy of magic and mayhem."

**Hardwired** by Walter Jon Williams (Futura, £3.50). Proficient sub-cyberpunk adventure sf.

**Ash Wednesday** by Chet Williamson (Headline, £3.50). Effective horror novel, commended by Ramsey Campbell and Robert Bloch.

### NEW DISTRIBUTORS

*Interzone* has new distributors – though specialist sf and fantasy dealers can still obtain the magazine through Titan Distributors, PO Box 250, London E3 4RT (tel. 01-980 6167/8), with whom we have a long-standing relationship.

The new distributors are Diamond-Europress (for the news trade) and Central Books (for general bookshops). Their addresses and phone numbers are given on page 3. Readers could help us greatly by passing this information to newsagents or booksellers who do not already stock *Interzone*. Thanks!



# LETTERS

Dear Editors:

The very day I returned from a holiday tour of the United States, I read Charles Platt's article IZ 24) bemoaning the state of Britain in comparison with it. And, indeed, it's difficult not to agree with much of what he says: as one steps down from the plane into the familiar grey overcast and an airport arrivals hall with decor only marginally better than that of a DHSS waiting room, one is struck by just how grotty the country looks. Never mind Thatcher's grim authoritarianism; just how much sunshine do we get here anyway? (The temperature in Washington DC on the day we left was 80°F.) And the radical bookshops in Seattle are infinitely superior to London's.

But Charles betrays his unfamiliarity with the current social climate with his remark that while British TV news treats trade union leaders as celebrities they rarely appear on American screens. Apart from being an indictment of American television's failure to ensure them a hearing equal to that given the management against which they're taking action, it simply isn't true that trade unions in this country are as powerful as he implies. Part of the Thatcherite project, after all, has been to club them into impotence through the fear of unemployment and massive fines if they do attempt anything. Only the fact that he's no longer resident here could leave him prone to uttering such received wisdom (and such old wisdom at that).

Is this relevant to science fiction? Well, yes, actually; because if Charles wants its writers to produce "realistic depiction(s) of people overcoming, rather than surrendering to, forces that are greater than themselves" and "stories that suggest, plausibly, how limits might be overcome" then those writers will have to start from a thorough grounding in objective reality and established facts – political and economic as well as social and technological. In his comments on trade unions, television, domestic architecture, and British reserve, Charles demonstrates only that he's been away from Britain too long to understand it any more. And on top of that, he seems to have forgotten that stories about the universe conquering mankind aren't a uniquely British phenomenon, but a constant of the world's story-telling since the year dot. If this makes sf the odd genre out, then he might be better employed speculating why this is so than complaining about Britain's alleged failure to embrace its apparent verities.

**Joseph Nicholas**  
London

Dear Editors:

Putting aside Charles Platt's naughty expatriate sneering at the old country, transparently designed to provoke a response from wearers of union jack vests (French shopkeepers more courteous than British? Come off it Charley, where've you been living?) he seems to be disturbed by a literary imbalance in the world. The British are writing pessimistic novels, when they should be producing optimistic books. Why? Well, er, downbeat writing is bad for your health. ("Sorry Mr Poe, Mr Hawthorne, we're striking you off the curricula – the students are catching emphysema from your stories") and the cure is to follow Horace Greeley's advice and "Go West, young man" to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield! ("Charley went that way and never wrote another disaster novel. Well, only one or two, and since then he's been born again, converted, reshaped.") So, all you gloomy Brits, spoiling the symmetry of Charley's sf landscape, we have to write upbeat books, then everyone will be producing optimistic fiction – hurrah! hurrah!

**Garry Kilworth**  
Ashington, Essex

Dear Editors:

After the uniformly excellent IZ 23, IZ 24 was, quite frankly, a disappointment. You proclaim yourself as the sole British professional magazine of science fiction and fantasy, yet "Heartland" could not be considered as either of these by any stretch of the imagination. Nor could "Salvage," which, although very well written, would have been better suited for publication in *The Face* than *Interzone*. As for "Animator," not only was this feeble shocker blindingly obvious from the very beginning, but the author's knowledge of special effects techniques is several years behind the times. Take a look at the puppet work in *Aliens* or the go-motion demon in *The Golden Child* (just don't look at the rest of this film) if you want to see miniatures moving without stop-motion strobing.

The best thing in IZ 24 was the thought-provoking article by Charles Platt on the state of modern Britain, which aroused more interest in me than any of the fiction.

On another subject, I notice that SMS has now moved into "mainstream" illustration, working on the current series of "The ABC Warriors" for 2000AD. Does this mean that (horrors!) he (she?) will no longer be appearing in *Interzone*?

**Ellen Lee**  
Hanley, Staffs.

**Editor's response:** We think you may have misread Karen Joy Fowler's "Heartland" – in our view its Land-of-Oz setting marked it clearly as a fantasy. As for SMS, yes, he has indeed

been working for 2000AD comic recently, but he continues to illustrate stories for IZ and we hope to have another strip from him soon. Charles Platt's provocative article drew a huge postbag, and we intend to run an essay "in reply" to it next issue.

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if you want details of that event). It has a foreword by the generous Brian Aldiss, and of course it was conceived as a follow-up to my earlier *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels* (Xanadu, 1985). But please note that the new book comes from a different publisher – this fact has already caused confusion, because (as I mentioned last issue) Xanadu are planning to release this autumn a volume called **Horror: The 100 Best Books**. The latter, which contains essays by many well-known authors, has been edited by the estimable Steve Jones and IZ writer **Kim Newman**. Just to pile confusion on possible confusion, Xanadu are also rumoured to be publishing a volume called *Fantasy: The 100 Best Books* by **James Cawthorn** (with **Michael Moorcock** leaning over his shoulder). However, Xanadu are being extremely secretive about this one, and nobody is saying just when it will appear. For those who are intrigued to know what the difference will be between Cawthorn's work and mine, I gather that the rival volume covers world fantasy ("books" not "novels") from the year dot, whereas mine is devoted to English-language novels since 1945. Right: is that clear?

## THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MAGAZINES

The afore-mentioned Steve Jones has edited a small irregular magazine called **Fantasy Tales** for some years. Now I'm pleased to hear that it is soon to appear as a twice-yearly paperback from Robinson Publishing, 11 Shepherd House, 5 Shepherd St., London W1Y 7LD. Persistence pays off – and let's hope the magazine does well in its new format. Another new fantasy magazine,

which should have made its debut long before this issue of *Interzone* reaches you, is Newsfield Publication's **Fear**. With a title like that, it's presumably aimed mainly at the horror market, so it will not necessarily be a direct competitor with *Interzone*. There should be an advert elsewhere in this issue of IZ which will tell you more about it.

All this is excellent news for young British writers of sf, horror and fantasy. Together with the original anthologies, such as Sphere's *Zenith* and Unwin's *Other Edens*, these magazines will provide an enlarged UK market for short stories. However, magazines do die off at rather an alarming rate. One which folded recently is **Jennings Magazine**, a literary periodical of similar format to IZ, which, as it happens, published a fair amount of sf. A sad demise. Another which died last year and has lately, perhaps rather shakily, been reborn is *The Fiction Magazine*. Edited by Chris Maillard (whatever happened to Judy Cooke?), it has now reappeared as a bedsheet-sized effort called simply **Fiction**. The first issue is long on interviews with the likes of Graham Swift and William Wharton, and rather short on stories. I feel dubious about this one's chances of survival.

Together with the well-established *Twilight Zone* (the "journal of the TV series") we seem to have started a trend for magazines with "zone" in the title. The latest is a new American horror journal called **Gorezone**. According to Rog Peyton's Andromeda Bookshop catalogue, the first issue contains "four giant bloody pull-out posters." Sounds just wonderful. If British readers want to try this, or other new US mags such as the potentially interesting **Argos F & SF** (which I don't think I've mentioned heretofore), they should write to Andromeda Bookshop, 84 Suffolk Street, Birmingham B1 1TA (021-643 1999). I also note that there is to be a new American quarterly publication called **Marion**

**Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine**. This is being edited and published by Bradley herself. If you're interested, write to MZB Enterprises, Box 72, Berkley, CA 94701, USA.

## HOW TO WRITE SF

Finally, may I recommend to aspiring writers (and, goodness knows, *Interzone* seems to hear from a great many of them) Christopher Evans's new book **Writing Science Fiction** (A. & C. Black, £4.95). This very sensible little handbook contains an early version of Chris's story "Artefacts" (IZ 23), together with copious notes on how he conceived it, developed it and revised it. Surrounding this core are useful chapters on "Ideas," "Plot and Narrative," "Characters," etc. If more people would read how-to books such as this perhaps we would receive fewer manuscripts which are fit only for instant rejection. However, this is probably a vain appeal on my part, because the worst submissions always come from people who have clearly never seen our magazine and have been given the address by some third party. All you regular readers know how to lay out a manuscript and how to submit it to a publication such as *Interzone* (and if you don't know by now – well, you can go away and read Chris Evans's book). No, it's all those other folk out there, the ones who will never read these words (and yet who aspire to become sf short-story writers), who will continue to offend us by sending us stories handwritten on tissue paper, or badly typed single-spaced with no margins on lined notepaper, or tightly bound in half-inch-thick cardboard, or... Sorry, I'm running away with myself, and you've probably heard it all before.

Enough for now. Enjoy this issue, and look out for the next. This column will be continued in just two months time.  
(David Pringle)

## COMING NEXT ISSUE

In the second bimonthly *Interzone*: a first-class new story from one of Britain's leading sf writers, Bob Shaw. Plus pieces by Eric Brown, John Sladek, Charles Stross and others. Also: an article by Christopher Priest, an interview with an up-and-coming writer, the Charles Platt column and all our usual features.



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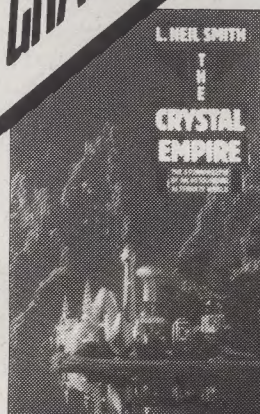
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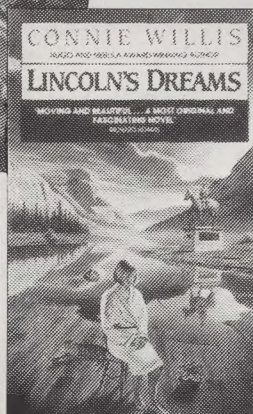
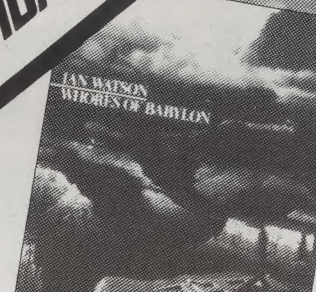
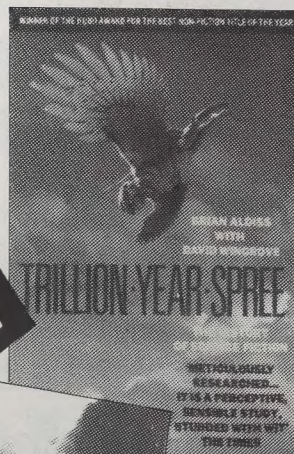
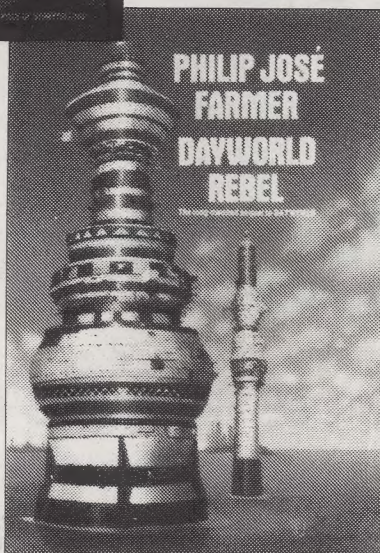
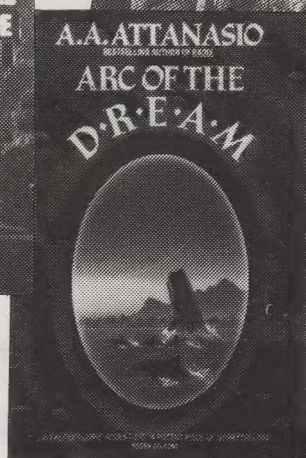
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